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borderline

The Comics Magazine

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In this issue:

Stuart Immonen, Peter David, Paul Castiglia, Fernando Ruiz, Phil Hester, Martin Eden and Grant Springfield - all interviewed.

Articles and features on:

Image Manga
EEC Comics
The Wretch
Miranda
Frank Bellamy
DC: Sale or Return
Mike Deodato Jr

Plus:
Captain Bastard, Den Leslie, Spoiler Warning, The O Men, the price of comics, comics' most eclectic reviews column and comics strips from Paul Rainey, Terry Wiley & Adrian Kermode

borderline
THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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This month's thanks go to: Mike Kidson for working his arse off continually for nothing. If anyone working on Borderline deserves to gain something from this it is he!

Cover by Jasmin-scented Jim Campbell, original cover art by Will Dixon – Sam Your Eye is looking at me!!

On April 1st: #20 features - a Borderline Special Event. 'Nuff said...

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BORDERLINES

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IT'S THAT MAN, AGAIN

Phil Hall is back and it's like he never went away (that's probably because he didn't) ...

IN the last issue, I announced my departure from these pages and passed the baton on. We all (hoped and) expected I'd take a long and deserved break, however the world had different plans; I just didn't know them at the time.

I'd decided that I needed a break from comics. I'd been doing it for so long and I had different things happening which made my desire to continue doing the comics thing wane. The day after #18 went live I switched the computer off and didn't look at anything for a week. I spent time with my wife, and at work, and just getting myself used to the fact that I wasn't involved any more. But that wasn't strictly true. I'd made a few promises last year and I felt obligated to see them through. One of them was to script a comic.

Remember when we ran Peet Clack's *Young Guns*? Before it appeared I had all the artwork and some of it was really

inspirational. I met up with Peet at Caption 2002 and asked him what he planned on doing with this great character called *Captain Bastard* he'd created, and I threw a few ideas I had at him and basically talked myself into the job of scripting his comic. I explained to Peet that because of my schedule I probably wouldn't be able to even think about doing it for a while but I wouldn't let him down. I thought it was quite cool to have another go at scripting a comic.

Two weeks after stopping my involvement with **Borderline** and comics I was bored rigid. I wanted to do something. So I opened the *Captain Bastard* file and started writing. I expected to switch my remaining time between the YMCA and doing the little things I never had the time to do over the last X number of years.

Then things started to go wrong. In no specific order: Mike Kidson, one of the driving forces behind **Borderline** and our reason and ability to produce this magazine regularly, quit. People, specifically 'some of *you* people' don't ever seem to have embraced the fact that **Borderline** isn't a website run by a couple of enthusiastic amateurs, who make a few dollars a month to cover their costs. **Borderline** has been designed as a *magazine* from the offset and to obtain the levels of journalism, editing and layouts we adhere to then people like Mike, myself and many others have to spend more time than your average webmaster getting it right. Mike needed to live; he needed to rediscover the areas of the industry he'd neglected since **Borderline** started and like Andy Winter and me, he needed a break.

Steve Allen, the guy I lined up to replace me as the magazine's designer and layouts man, had to pull out of his new commitment because of a sudden serious illness.

Also one of the creators we interviewed last issue started acting like an arsehole and bully-boy and you start to wonder why you're even wasting your time doing something like this when shit like that happens? I can understand why the **Borderline** team is dwindling in numbers – this is an industry that expects no thanks so it gives none. This industry, as an example, is actually the exact opposite of what it tries to model itself as.

Moving on: I'm still working on *Captain Bastard*, but I'm also expanding my comics horizons. If there is another thing I'm really excited about it's a project I'm working on with the YMCA. I'd like to say this is my idea – it should have been, but it wasn't. A friend and colleague at one of the homeless centres I work at asked me if there was any way we could produce a comicbook with some of the homeless and excluded teenagers we work with. Because we're a charitable organisation we have good relationships with certain companies and we've already secured a professional printer who will produce the comic for material costs only. But what I'm doing is working with a lot of the young people in the centres on what they want to do and see, while contributing towards the comic.

The plan is for the young people to write and, in as many cases as possible, illustrate it. The young people need to tell a story in a limited amount of pages and the story has to deal with the reasons why they become homeless and how they found themselves at our door. Hopefully we'll have a section at the back explaining a bit about the young people who produced the comic and what they are now achieving. My plan – and this is also thanks to someone else, Mike Kidson – is for those who can't draw to do something else – express themselves in some way or another. That might be through photography and then Photoshop manipulation, montage, collage, fumetti – or whatever way they want to express their ideas is great, as long as it reproduces in print. Mike K. has always been a believer in expression is more important than artistic ability and this may well back up his ideals.

We want it to help empower the young

people as well as raise awareness to the plight of homeless youngsters. Hopefully we'll cover our costs and maybe raise some money for the homeless. I'd like to think I'd be able to get a few people involved in this in some way – after all the likes of Alan Moore, Alan Davis and Jamie Delano all reside in Northamptonshire and they might be interested in getting involved in some way as a charitable exercise!

The thing is if there are any comics creators out there who would like to be involved in this they can contact me at the usual *philhall@borderlinemagazine.co.uk* email address. This is a yearlong project; so don't worry if you haven't got the time at the moment!

So, 2003 is already late kicking off – some things change and some things stay the same. We're going to miss Mike; he was instrumental in the production of this issue and without him it will be a struggle. We wish him well. Martin is back in the publisher's chair and is doing a splendid job editing reviews since Andy departed.

Next issue is going to be something special, we're calling it the **BORDERLINE: Access All Areas Edition** and you can be part of it... It will be FREE too! ☺

ILLUSTRATING IMMONEN

THE STUART IMMONEN INTERVIEW

*STUART IMMONEN first came to public attention when his pencils featured in a ten page story in **Showcase 93** #12 for DC Comics. That depiction of Martian Manhunter brought him regular work on DC's **Legion of Super-Heroes**. Some work for Marvel followed, but then he returned to DC to take over on **The Adventures of Superman** for 30 issues. This led to him not only pencilling but also writing the legendary DC series **Action Comics**.*

*In 2002 he moved over to Gorilla Comics, where he drew **Shockrockets** and **Superstar**, both collaborations with Kurt Busiek. The Gorilla Comics project was not to last, having proved himself already with DC and Marvel, Immonen was virtually guaranteed work. He continues to work for both companies and has received praise for recent story arcs on Marvel flagship titles **Thor** and **The Incredible Hulk**. His next project, once again incollaboration with Kurt Busiek, will be **Superman: Secret Identity**.*

*Despite working on this new project and being one of the most in-demand talents in comics, Stuart spared **Borderline**'s Dan Black some time so that Dan could ask him about his Sisters of Mercy CD collection...*

Borderline: *First, the basics: what got you into creating comics and how did you break into the industry?*
Stuart Immonen: I was one of those oddball characters who never had any ambition (you could actually stop the sentence there) to get into comics as a profession. I had read them forever, of course, and had become enough of a fan to recognize the creators that I liked, and had some inkling of the vast world outside my experience thanks to a remaindered copy of Maurice Horn's *Encyclopaedia of Comics,* but I never for one moment thought that I could be one of those people. I suppose that it just seemed such a foreign notion; I had *no* idea how one might even start.

Anyway, eventually I got to university with the intention of gaining a degree in Fine Arts and a teaching certificate, and while living in Toronto I became aware of smaller publishers, even individuals, putting out very interesting stuff. Toronto had Andromeda Distributing, the Silver Snail and The Beguiling and Vortex Comics publishing early works by Ty Templeton, Ted McKeever and Chester Brown, so there was a lot of inspiration happening locally. I finally got the notion that I could do

something myself, and coerced my good friend Kathryn Kuder to write a story that I could illustrate. We took a proposal to Bill Marks at Vortex and after scanning half a page, he suggested that we try self-publishing. So we did.

We formed One Horse Leadworks and over the course of a year, published three issues of **Playground**, our story, and three issues of **Headcheese**, a humor anthology collecting the works of creators local to the Toronto area. **Playground** was picked up by Caliber Press, which at the time was doing very well for itself publishing **The Crow** and **Baker Street**, and I drew two issues of **Nut Runners** (written by **Headcheese** alumnus Sheldon Inkol) for Rip Off Press. Around this same time, I began sending out portfolios to anyone I could think of, and eventually was hired to draw a series of unauthorized rock n' roll biographies for Revolutionary Comics for a miserable pittance, but it was paying work, and I got to polish my chops and get paid for the effort. I quit my regular job (managing a comic shop) when I began working for Revolutionary, not because the pay was better, but because I just couldn't do both. Work for Innovation followed, and then a few gigs for Marvel and DC, which blossomed into fill-ins, which led to the regular stint on **Legion Of Super-Heroes**.

So it wasn't so much a break into the industry as a series of stalled efforts; at least, that's how it seemed at the time. I found it very frustrating at the time, but I really did need the couple of years' experience I had working for the independents before I could do work for Marvel or DC - even now, I'm not sure I deserve the leeway I'm sometimes given; there's always so much to learn.

BL: *Who do you count as your biggest influences?*
SI: This is tough - there are so very many people whose work influences mine. I like to think that I take small parts here and there and see if they work for me. The funny thing is that I don't even think that I have a particular style as such - my work's always changing to suit the current project. I don't consider myself one of the great innovators, but I think I can synthesize different aspects of different people's work and make them cohesive - maybe that's just the way everyone works! This also goes a long way to explain why I like different artists for different things; my list is rather eclectic: Hergé, Wyeth, Cornwell, Loomis, Bob Peak, Syd Mead, Tommy Lee Edwards, John Paul Leon, Paul Pope, Ash Wood, Baudoin, Moebius, Carl Barks, Kirby, John Romita, John Buscema, Alex Toth... I'll think of more later, I'm sure...

BL: *Artists can be their own worst critics... Are you personally happy with your style?*
SI: Oh, no, not at all. I mean, maybe that's why I change media or styles of working so often. I'm still waiting for the big epiphany. It may never happen, I don't know. I think there are moments, certain panels, or a colour scheme, or an expression, or a single line - those times when I'm happy seem far and few between sometimes, but it happens.

BL: *How do you manage to get such natural and realistic images of people doing unnatural and spectacular things? Do you ever use models or photographs as a basis for your work, or does everything come straight from your mind's eye?*
SI: Uhhhh... how? Well, you're right in that I use photos and a mirror and so on - in other words, the real world - frequently in my work. I sometimes think that it's a terrible crutch that hampers my being able to do certain things, like be creative... I just don't think I have the kinetic memory for that sort of thing. Some artists can draw anatomy very well from memory; others work in such a stylised manner that "realism" doesn't matter so much. I'm neither one of those people. Every drawing seems like a struggle sometimes. Still, the basic methodology is that I'll construct a composition without any kind of reference whatsoever, placing people and objects in the panel shape, then I'll layer in detail, and incorporate textures and elements from different sources: how a piece of clothing folds, how something reflects light, what a BMW V8 engine looks like, et cetera, and hopefully unify them in one drawing. It helps when I'm doing inks and, more recently, colours, since I don't have to rely on someone else's interpretation (apart from the reader's) of what I'm trying to get across.

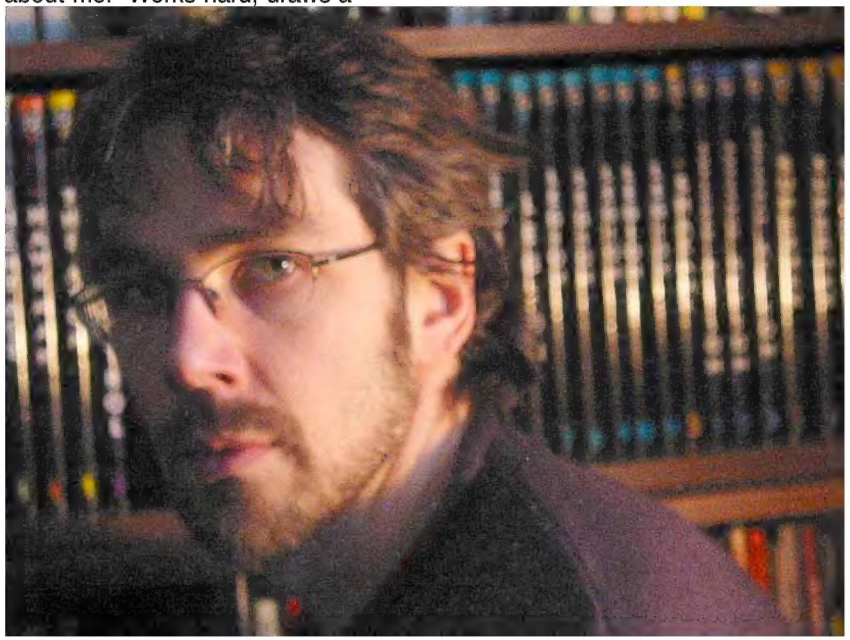
I don't agree that using reference is "cheating" as some artists seem to think - it's just a tool, like anything else. If it helps me achieve what I want in a drawing, I don't see the harm. One noted painter known for his realistic work actually questioned my use of reference - he couldn't believe it. So maybe it's not so evident.

BL: *I read a long time ago that you did an adaptation of the film* The Lawnmower Man*, and it was never released - why was that?*
SI: I'm not sure exactly - I think the license expired or something like that. A few pages were released as promotional material with an unusual spattery airbrush colour job. It was kind of fun - they provided me with slides from the film, and I dug up some photos of Pierce Brosnan and

Jeff Fahey. It was very early in my career - I did a terrible job, I'm sure. I haven't looked at those pages (if indeed I still have them) in ages.

BL: *You've worked with Kurt Busiek on a number of occasions. What is it that fuels the creative flame between you two?*
SI: I find Kurt to be a very intelligent creator - he likes to reason through everything he writes. He also asks for a lot of input from his co-creators, which is a very generous way to work. He's not nit-picky; if something strikes him as being incomplete or not quite right, he'll be constructive about it, and suggest alternatives instead of just shooting it down. Kurt also has a lot of great ideas, and the amazing part for me is that some of them go way back - **Superstar**, for instance, is something he thought of in high school. I've got such a crap memory. I don't know what he'd say about me! "Works hard, draws a good spaceship, doesn't complain" - something like that, I bet.

BL: *What is the creative process when you work with Kurt? Do you meet, or is it a relationship that only exists via email or telephone?*
SI: We've met on occasion, but only (so far) at conventions, where you can only get so much done. We live on opposite coasts of North America, so it's much more convenient to call or email. This characterizes most of my relationships, actually; I've become quite a hermit over the past decade. It's gotten so that just leaving the house is a chore not worth doing. But anyway, Kurt will have his idea, which he'll have gone over with his editor, if necessary, and we'll chat about it for an hour or so - at the beginning of a major project, like **Shockrockets**, we'll talk for longer - he'll have a basic structure in mind, and we'll discuss the characters and what they have to do and so on. It's very fluid, really, and can change directions midway through. As I said, Kurt's very generous, and wants lots of input - I'm generally the opposite. I'll stew on something for ages and not talk about it.



The remarkably normal looking Stuart Immonen above, and far right the cover to **Superman: Secret Identity**, which he's producing with Kurt Busiek.

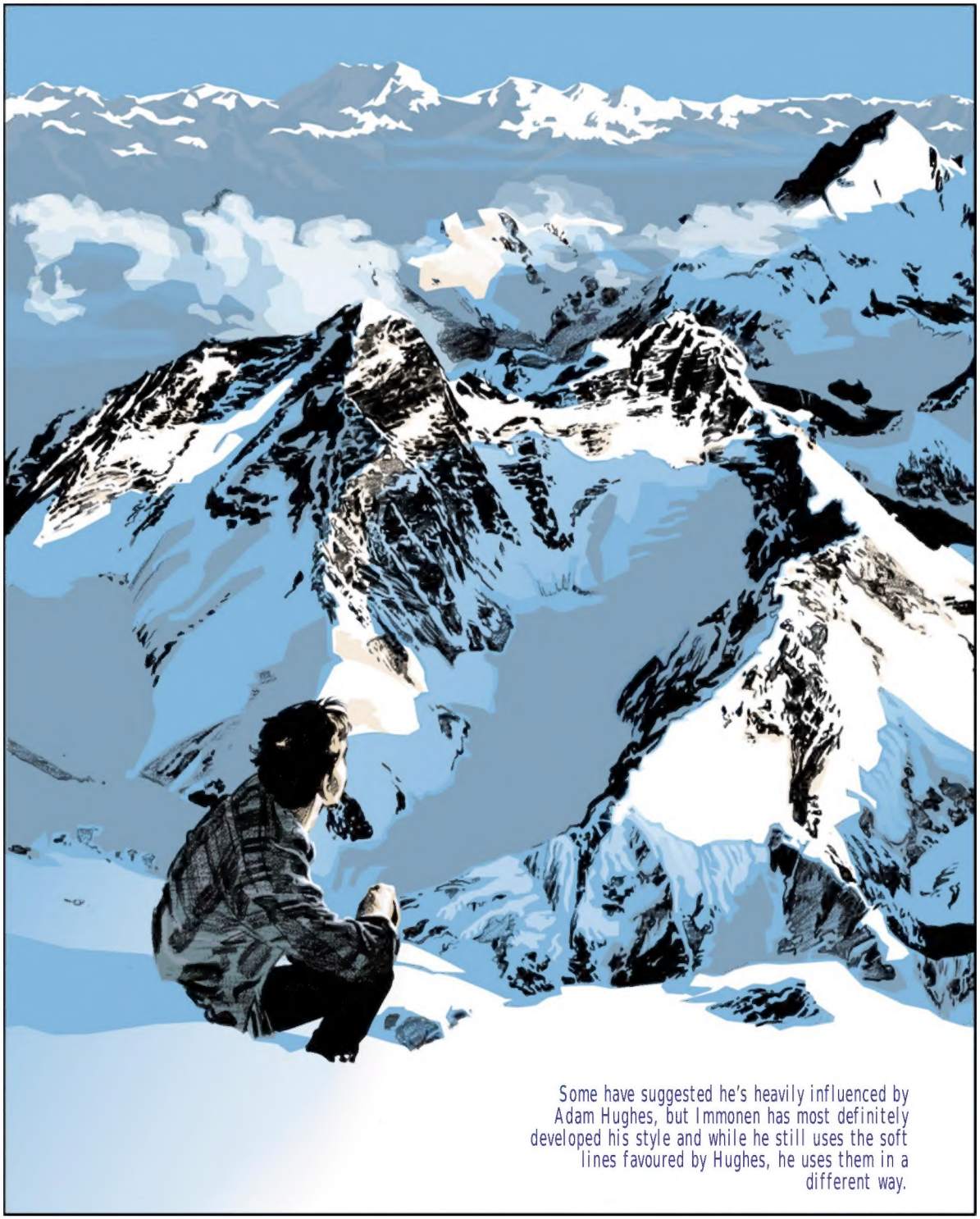
BL: *I saw a page of the new project that has the Superman character looking out across a mountain range... is it fair to say that you find drawing landscapes as easy as drawing characters?*
SI: Ha! I find everything hard to draw, but it beats digging ditches (though I've done that, too). On this project in particular, there are a number of dramatic pauses in the narrative. It's an interesting challenge to balance the big action shots with the big non-action shots. It's the most David Lean I've ever been. It's the kind of thing that's done as a matter of course in manga - Dylan Horrocks and James Kochalka epitomize the western approach. It's the kind of full-stop panel that most 22-page monthlies simply don't have the real estate to explore, which is a shame. I'm keen on doing more work like this, but it means that it probably won't happen in a mainstream comic.

BL: *Personally, I'm always amazed that you're not tied down to a monthly book. Why is that? You must be getting offers on a daily basis...*
SI: Maybe I am, maybe....
I'm not on a monthly project because at the moment I choose not to be. I've done it and it can be a drag, although I wonder if the expectation is even there for the art team to be there every month - it seems to me that those days may be gone altogether. You know, doing six issues of **Hulk** or six of **Thor** is almost like being the regular artist –

actually, in the case of the **Hulk**, I was, since the plan was always to do a series of stories with different art teams. But six issues in a row has been my M.O. since **Shockrockets** - I don't think anyone minds much. I also don't think that I'll be able to do the kinds of things that I want to do on a monthly title. Hopefully, without sounding too ivory tower-ish, the kinds of stories that I'm interested in telling don't have much of a place in the mainstream. I was thrilled to have *Jeopardy Jones* appear in **Imagination Rocket** and Kathryn and I are talking to someone about a full-length project, and she and I are doing a short story for the *Matrix* website - neither of these things are going to capture the superhero audience, but they're worth doing nonetheless.

BL: *You're back with Kurt for **Superman: Secret Identity** - what can you tell us about the book?*
SI: Kurt has more of a handle on the "high concept", and frankly it's been a while since I even thought about the big picture - you know, what it's *about*. But it's basically the story of a person in the "real world" where there are no superheroes, who happen to be named Clark Kent and then happens to gain the abilities of Superman. It's told in four vignettes, from four different periods in his life. My job is really just to make it look good. To sell the concept that it's really taking place. One of the things that helps is the "movie time" we take to tell the story - it doesn't just rush through, we dwell on moments and I think it works. The other thing is that I'm doing full art, including colour, which means that I have total control over the look of it. I'm responsible for setting the mood and the atmosphere in a way that I haven't been able to do up until now, thanks to the faith that the powers that be have placed in me. It's a major undertaking, over 200 pages in total. I'm hoping that I'll be able to pull it off convincingly.

BL: *What part is the 'net playing in modern comics? Do you think it's healthy, or that it's the end of paper-based publications?*
SI: I haven't seen any evidence of that. There are some cool online comics on the Internet, but they're sparse and not all of them really have anything to do with the screen proportions or the capabilities of the web itself. A few sites, like *www.serializer.net*, are working with micropayments - I don't know how well that works for them, though. Mostly, as far as comics are concerned, the net consists of vanity sites (visit mine!) or comics journalism (visit yours!) or usenet-style commentary. I don't actually spend a lot of time online trawling for comic material. I have too many actual comics waiting to be read.
This is not to say that an electronic revolution couldn't happen, but I don't see it the way, say, Scott McCloud does. I find the Internet charming and frustrating, but its saving grace is that it's decentralized. Anybody can create



Some have suggested he's heavily influenced by Adam Hughes, but Immonen has most definitely developed his style and while he still uses the soft lines favoured by Hughes, he uses them in a different way.

something and share it with potentially thousands, if not millions, of others, which is appealing. If I had more time, I'd take advantage of it myself, but it's enough work just to try and maintain my site without having to actually make content for it. ☺

BL: *What work are you producing away from the field of comics?*
SI: You mean illustrations? I do work for a New York company called Puzzability, which provides third-party services for magazines, websites or anyone who wants games and puzzles. They provide stuff for the pages of *Disney Adventures*, among other publications. I also work for *Nickelodeon* magazine, a kid's magazine run by the TV channel of the same name. Kathryn and I also organize the London Comic Jam, a monthly get-together where we co-operatively make funny pictures. But that's actually in the field of comics. The LCJ has a website: *www.eccentrix.com/artist/lcj*

BL: What's keeping you entertained in the world of film, music and television at the moment?
SI: Oooh, not a whole lot. We got rid of cable TV a year or so ago, and haven't looked back. Movies are generally too expensive, so they either get rented or we go the second-run theatre. This Christmas we filled out our DVD collection with some old Dick Van Dyke shows, and Woody Allen's *Manhattan*. And *Attack of the Clones*, of course.

Musically speaking, I'm constantly trying to fill holes: just bought a CD of Erik Satie, and one of Tom Waits' early efforts. Sitting by the computer, where the work gets done, are the soundtracks to *Blade Runner*, *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights*, and to the Dreamcast game *Jet Grind Radio*. There's REM, Hi-Standard, Green Day, Cocteau Twins, Björk, The Waterboys, Sloan, Beastie Boys, Hüsker Dü, James Kochalka Superstar, Joy Division, Pet Shop Boys, Mike Watt, and the Sisters of Mercy... don't get me started.

BL: *Are there any comics that you're currently reading and thinking, "Damn! I wish I was involved in that!"?*
SI: No, never - the ones I really like are such a complete package, whether being done by one person (like Horrocks' ***Hicksville***) or by such a perfectly knit team (like **100 Bullets**) that I couldn't imagine them being done by anyone else - that would take more ego than I have, I think....

Further reading:
http://www.immonen.ca
http://www.eccentrix.com/artist/lcj

THE BLANK PAGE

Andrew 'Chev' Cheverton ponders the Elephant Man of modern comicbooks...

ONE thing I enjoy is clever design. I reviewed a comic called *Uberbabe* recently because its invention was to print its pages on one long strip of paper, and then to concertina that up to form a comic. I have mini-comics that fit in the palm of my hand, and huge 2D paper palaces (generally courtesy of Chris Ware) that you could use to sail a small ship with.

The Clock Maker is an Image mini-series written by Jim Krueger, whose excellent *Foot Soldiers* has long been one of the few independent superhero comics worth the read, and drawn by Matt Smith. Its format not only defies belief, it also very nearly defies description. Imagine a comic the size of one of those old Marvel Treasury Editions and then fold the thing in half lengthways, making sure to bust the spine as you do so. That's what is presented to you on the shelf – a magazine folded in half. When you open it to try and read it, the pages warp and tear away from the staples, because there are only two staples struggling to hold this monstrosity together against all the laws of physics that state that it should collapse under its own weight and flawed design. Maybe this would be in part forgivable if the interior artwork was deserving of the format, but its twelve pages fail to use the enlarged format in any way that a standard sized comic would achieve. Matt Smith's artwork is excellent, but Bernie Wrightson's *Frankenstein* this is not. And yes, you read that correctly; there are only twelve actual pages of story here for your $2.95.

Can I have a sticky bun, please? We couldn't find a hi-res picture of **The Clockmaker** nor could we find one of John Merrick, so use your imaginations...

Barry Windsor-Smith and Dark Horse tried the enlarged format for *Storyteller*, which was supposed to be over-sized not only to showcase the intricate artwork, but also so that the adult reader could recreate the experience of being a child again, reading a comic that required two hands to hold. The latter concept is a dubious one at best, and the third issue quickly allayed the idea that Windsor-Smith's work could not have been as well appreciated in the pages of a standard comic book when all efforts at detailed and beautiful art began to feel the pinch of the looming deadline. It became almost amusing to follow the debates about how *Storyteller*

was too big to fit on the shelves of comic book stores or, more to the point, into collector's bags and boxes. Windsor-Smith did himself few favours when he launched diatribes against these complaints, little realizing that insulting the habits of the few fans still buying his work was rash and ill-considered when such an unwieldy comic was sure to vex anyone when it came to finding some way of storing the ugly thing. Even the most anal-retentive comic geeks have a point when they state that you have to find a way of storing everything somehow.

Realizing that not only was *Storyteller* too big to fit into a box, but also too limp to stand on a shelf, Dark Horse provided – for about $10 – a slipcase to house 12 issues, just as the series was cancelled at issue 9, never to return. I have a neatly stored collection of the series for all the good it does me; none of the strips in *Storyteller* were ever completed, so – although I can pull the slipcased set down from the shelf at my convenience – I have neither the urge nor the need to reread the stories. So, although I was one of those who grumbled at the larger than necessary format, and who bought an over-priced slipcase because the comics wouldn't go into any of my comic boxes, the comics could have been thrown in the attic for all the good they do me.

The Clock Maker is similarly a triumph of design over common sense, of blinkered stupidity just to look different on the shelf. But if what you end up offering is a bent, ugly comic only 12 pages long, then you're shooting yourself in the foot. I watched four people notice *The Clock Maker* in my local store, all of whom wondered at it enough to take it down from the shelf. Three of them opened it up, leafed through it and replaced it. The third couldn't even get the thing to open properly without tearing the staples loose, so he gave up.

Irrespective of the quality of writing and invention, the beauty of the storytelling and the art, *The Clock Maker* is an unlovely and unwieldy object. It has been designed to stand out and to be unique and in that it has succeeded – it is the Elephant Man of modern comics.

Once again, I despair...

THE FUNKIEST PAD IN TOWN

PETER David - also referred to by his initials of PAD - has been one of the industry's more outspoken creators, unafraid to bite the hand that feeds him even as it passes out the biscuits. Borderline's Rik Offenberger recently caught up with him to talk about the industry and his plans for 2003...

Borderline: *You have had your feuds over the years, with John Byrne, Todd McFarlane and now Joe Quesada. Would you say that you don't play well with others, or that you don't suffer fools well?*
PAD: Well, certainly the latter is true on a general note, but I wouldn't say any of the men you bring up are fools. The fact is that there are lots of people in the industry who don't get along for any number of reasons. And in most cases, the fans never know about it. In my case, they know, because I have this odd philosophy that it's gutless to talk trash about people behind their backs. If someone says something publicly about something you feel strongly about, my attitude is, you respond publicly. You don't sit around in bars at conventions and badmouth them when they're not around. Or you don't go on line and talk tough while then signing your name as "Deathkill 123." Hell, by the standards being applied to me, three quarters of the internet is feuding with pros.

BL: *Is the general attitude 'Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke'?*
PAD: No, because it would sound trivial. My attitude is that I say what I say, and you take it or leave it as you see fit. The problem with the word "feud" is that it makes it sound like I have it in for people. I don't. But that attitude causes people to study the alleged "why" of what I say rather than what I'm actually saying, and that's unfortunate.

BL: *You started in the Marketing department at Marvel; are all of your feuds just an attempt to market yourself? After all, no press is bad press.*
PAD: Again, "feud" makes it sound personal. As if Joe Quesada's great great grandfather stole a cow from my great great grandfather and the families have been at war ever since. Here's the thing: I started the column twelve years ago. At the time, a lot of noses were put out of joint. It was considered by many in the industry to be grandstanding to put one's opinions out there week after week.

This, of course, was before everybody and his brother had their own website and put their opinions out there week after week. But I think some of that resentment still holds and I'm judged by that. The "Captain Marvel" stunt was just that: A PR ploy to try and get attention for a storyline that I very much believed in. I was proud and excited by the direction I was taking it, and I wanted as many people to read about it and know about it as possible. Talking to Joe privately about ways to stave off

Below: Leo Manco's Captain Marvel... circa retro 1968?

a price hike wouldn't have accomplished anything, because the ship had already sailed. It had already been announced, bringing with it the negative publicity a price hike always brings. So I did something drastic, because I felt that passionate about the storyline.

In general, contrary to popular belief, I don't say to myself, "Gee, my sales are down, who can I pick a fight with this week?" I say, "What's happening in the industry that could make an interesting column."

BL: *Do you think some of your difficulties at Marvel stem from the fact that you did a lot of work for the previous editors at Marvel and you aren't considered part of the new hip crowd?*
PAD: Dunno. You're asking me to read the minds of the people there.

BL: *If you were the editor-in-chief at Marvel how would you run things differently?*
PAD: Well, for starters, I wouldn't fire me.

BL: *Joe Quesada has taken issue with your column in the Comic Buyers Guide "But I Digress". Do you see any validity to his claim that employees shouldn't attack their employer publicly or attempt to show their employer in a bad light publicly?*
PAD: Once upon a time, I was a Marvel employee, and I absolutely toed the company line. That was part of my job. It was understood. It came with having an office and a title and paid vacation. Now I'm a freelancer. The obligation I have is to turn in work of publishable quality on a timely basis. I do that. That's the extent of my obligation.

I comment publicly solely about things that are said and done publicly. I don't take private conversations and make them fodder for "But I Digress." I see what companies say and do to the public and say, "Hey, wait a minute, have you considered—?" I don't "show them in a bad light." I point out that they have shown *themselves* in a bad light. Furthermore, Marvel obviously has no problem if I criticize any other publisher, particularly considering the open disdain they express for DC. They just want to be treated differently. And not just by me: By everyone. If anyone from other CBG columnists to retailers to fans take issue with policies, they get it with both barrels.

They're a company. No more and no less than that and, to my mind, are entitled exactly to the same amount of loyalty that the company has traditionally shown to its employees. To Marvel, historically, talent is disposable. I understand that, having been disposed of in the past. I'm just not sure why there's this public vibe being given out that that's not the case, and there's this expectation of two-way loyalty, especially in light of the fact that Stan Lee is suing them. STAN LEE, for crying out loud. Has there ever been any more of a company supporter than Stan? Look how that turned out.

BL: *On the other hand, wasn't Joe aware of your column, its content and format prior to your employment?*
PAD: One would think. There's three likely reasons that no one ever tried to get back at me for the column: First, because I've always played fair and the head honchos know it. If I never said anything critical, how could anyone take the column seriously when I say something supportive? Second, because I've never crossed the line and used inside information or private conversations as fodder for columns, so they know I can be trusted. And third, ultimately they know that I can't do them any serious damage, nor am I trying to. The column's disposable. Who remembers what I wrote about four weeks ago? Six months ago? A year ago? It's not like, week after week, I write "Boycott Marvel! DC sucks!" Now **that** would be constantly attacking.

BL: *As we said earlier, you started in the marketing department at Marvel and have been with the company your entire freelance career, would it be difficult psychologically not to be a part of Marvel?*
PAD: Well I survived several years of wandering in the wastelands not being a part of Marvel, and came out of it with a thriving novel career and an optioned stage play.

We're now going to focus on Marvel's U-Decide event. For those who are hearing about it for the first time here, the U-Decide promotion started with Peter David publicly offering to write the monthly ***Captain Marvel*** *title for free, if Marvel would promote the book and roll back an impending price increase. An online war of words started between David and Editor-in-Chief, Joe Quesada. Publisher, Bill Jemas, counter offered a competition with Peter David. Over a six month period Jemas and David would each write a comic, Peter would write* ***Captain Marvel*** *and Bill would write a new title,* ***Marville****. The title that sold fewer copies would be canceled. Thus David would be competing for his job. Later, Quesada joined the competition with* ***Ultimate Adventures****, which he would edit. At Quesada's's insistence the stakes were lowered, to a pie in the face to himself if he lost, a plunge in a dunk tank for Jemas if he lost or living with defeat for David if he lost.*

BL: *The U-Decide promotion was set*

up WWF style, even to the point where the heal promoter wont give you newsstand distribution, and you still win. Is this latest claim that Joe will fire you if you print negative things about Marvel more promotional hype or is this a serious threat to your career?
PAD: It's a serious threat to my work at Marvel. And Joe and Bill have certainly taken enough shots at my writing ability to do me some damage from fans who take it at face value. But I think my career is doing just fine.

Young Justice - it's been a bigger success than DC probably ever expected.

***BL:** The U-Decide centered around a price increase, now they are increasing the price to $2.99 in April anyway, don't you think winning U-Decide should have guaranteed you the lower price point?*
PAD: I'd have thought that, yeah. I suspect there's far greater impetus for the price hike that supersedes U-Decide.

***BL:** You were around when everyone said if comics go to a $1.00 no one will purchase them, do you think the $3.00 barrier to sales is real or artificial?*
PAD: It has to do with price elasticity. There's not going to be a massive rebellion as fans en masse stop buying books the second they hit $3. But you will continue to lose unit sales while impeding the ability to pick up new readers because of the daunting price point. The question is, at what point in the erosion does the price hike no longer make up for the lost unit sales? The answer is, I don't know. But I'm thinking that sooner rather than later, the 22 page package is going to have to go away in favor of something more manga styled. A means of giving people more bang for their buck.

***BL:** Care to expand on that concept? Are you thinking of an anthology of original material, maybe comprising what is currently carried in half-a-dozen different titles? Or a reversion to quarterly/bi-annual/annual publication of, say, a 100-page Batman title featuring one complete story?*
PAD: Whatever works. It's ridiculous to limit oneself to one particular type of material in the format. Try an anthology style of different types of half a dozen different titles. Try a book that has a variety of stories about the same character. Try one complete story, told by either diverse hands or a single author. Regular book publishing doesn't limit itself to one type of content. Why should we?

***BL:** What do you think the anthology format would do apropos extending the life of a series? For example, would there still be a continuing Supergirl series if there were a Superman anthology title?*
PAD: Yes, exactly. What I'm saying is nothing radical; it's the way comics were when I was a kid. You'd buy *Action Comics* or *Adventure Comics* and there would be a lead story and then there'd be a back-up story or stories featuring Supergirl or Jimmy Olsen or whomever. Same concept. It would benefit any number of characters who for whatever reason have trouble sustaining a single monthly title, but fit quite nicely as a back-up series or occasional strip.

***BL:** What would you say to those who say that the creator-led nature of many modern American comic books makes the possibility of a change to the anthology format unlikely? The reasoning is that too many books are sold on Big Name Creators rather than characters, and Big Name Creators egos won't allow for the possibility of one of the "support acts" getting better reviews than they do?*
PAD: I say it's nonsense. "Won't allow?" The publishers give far less of a damn about egos than they do about selling books. If this is what the market morphs into, will there be creators who announce, "That's it, my ego won't allow me to share the stage, I'm out of comics!" I very much doubt if. Or if there are, I think they'd be in small enough number to be negligible. Nor do I believe for a moment that books are sold on "Big Name Creators'." I've long said that when it comes to ordering and buying patterns, the first two criteria are publisher and character. Artist ranks third, and writer consideration a distant last. Fan loyalty to creators is transitory at best, and it always has been.

***BL:** What's your response to another criticism of the idea, which is that a 100-page-or-more book will feature (if not immediately, then eventually) 22 pages of a popular character and 78 pages-or-more of filler, forcing the reader to buy Expensive Anthology Featuring Wolverine And Some Other Guys at ten dollars a pop to get the same Wolverine story he's currently getting at three dollars?*
PAD: Keep the price to a hell of a lot less than ten dollars.

***BL:** Marvel and DC went to better paper and computer coloring in the 90's, this is expensive, do you see returning to color coding with large dot patterns and pulp paper as a viable option for comics?*
PAD: Not really, no.

***BL:** You produced 152 issues of The Incredible Hulk, do you see yourself sticking with a character like that ever again or was the a unique situation?*
PAD: If I felt I had stories to contribute, sure, I'd stick around. The question is whether readers would.

***BL:** You have always had a nice blend of humor mixed with the action to make your stories very enjoyable, how do you decide how much humor is enough, and how much is too much?*
PAD: Generally I strive for contrast. Ideally, the humor serves to set up the drama and vice versa. I try not to let one overwhelm the other. Whether I always succeed is up for debate. For that matter, there's different types of humor. There's word play, banter, sight gags, situational, character. You use whatever seems right for the moment.

***BL:** What is the process you work with, plot/script or full script?*
PAD: Full script.

***BL:** Do you end up writing based on your artist's strengths, or do you have a story to tell, and tell it with whomever you are working with?*
PAD: I try to cater to the artist's

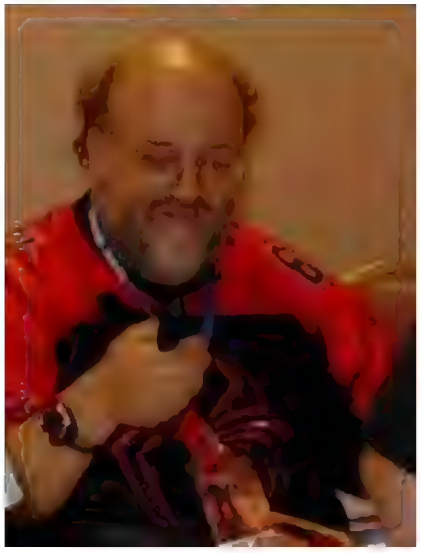
strengths, but that depends upon the artist being around long enough for me to find them. Then again, every so often I'm blessed with an artist who can do virtually anything I throw at them, like a Todd Nauck or Leonard Kirk. That's very liberating.

***BL:** You have worked on a lot of characters, at DC and Marvel. What title or character would you love to work on if you only got the chance?*
PAD: I never answer this question involving active characters, because it will come across like implied criticism. Saying, for instance, "I'd love to work on Batman" becomes translated in the retelling to, "Hey, current people writing Batman, Peter David says he doesn't like what you're doing and thinks he could do a much better job." Involving inactive characters, Adam Strange. Doc Savage. And I'd love to do a **Phantom Meets Tarzan** team up.

***BL:** Series come and series go; it's one of the great constants in comics. You have two series ending, **Supergirl** and **Young Justice**, while your future on **Captain Marvel** is questionable. Is this all just a matter of coincidence, bad timing, etc.?*
PAD: Crappy timing. *YJ* is being cancelled to make way for the *Titans* book keying off the new animated series. *Supergirl* is simply one of a number of lower-selling titles that DC is cancelling, despite the fact that sales are jumping due to the new storyline and the cancellation is now coming across as premature. They're cancelled a raft of titles in the past few months; mine just got caught in the wave, even though it's jumped 40 slots on the Diamond ranking and #75 is going for $12 on Ebay.

***BL:** What irons do you have in the fire for 2003?*
PAD: Comics wise, a new series called *The Fallen Angel* I created for DC Comics, which should be pretty exciting. *Soulsearchers and Company*, the series most retailers swear doesn't exist, rolls into its second decade. I have some projects with Dreamwave and Dark Horse that haven't been officially announced, so I won't mention them here. Book wise, I have five novels coming out this year: the novelization of *The Hulk* movie; *Tong Lashing*, the next adventure of "Sir Apropos of Nothing"; *One Knight Only,* the sequel to *Knight Life*; and two more book in the *New Frontier* series. Also I've written a straight-up dramatic play called *Shoestrings* which has been optioned by producers in Los Angeles, so we'll see where that goes.

To visit Peter David on the web go to http://peterdavid.malibulist.com
To visit DC Comics on the web go to www.dccomics.com
To visit Marvel Comics on the web go to www.marvel.com



TURNING JAPANESE

Manga comics from the Far East have become firm favourites with a certain type of western reader, with a steady flow of series' being republished and translated for the American audience, a practice that has been going on for many years now.

US publishers have been hoping to reproduce the success of these foreign titles with home-produced efforts. Mike Sivier introduces a picture preview of the latest batch - from Image Comics.

UNDETERRED by Marvel Comics' damp squib entries last year, Image is the latest American company to dip its inkbrushes into the Manga style of comicbook.

The California-based company is launching four all-new, manga-tinted series to mark Manga Month in April.

The four new titles include: **The Agents** (left) by Ben Dunn and Kevin Gunstone, **Heirs of Eternity** by Jose Torres (right), Jae Tsai and Jim Royal, **Rotogin: Junkbotz** by Jay Lee and J Korim, and **Soul of the Samurai** by Will Dixon.

The Agents is a six-issue miniseries set in the ashes of nuclear devastation wrought upon the cities of Washington and Moscow 30 years previously, where a planet-wide protectorate was formed in Britain called The Agency.

This group enforces its own brand of defensive guardianship through espionage and counteraction. Not all of the Earth is united in this New World Order, though, as individual countries, states and rival organizations threaten to undermine and destroy all The Agency stands for.

Heirs of Eternity is a four-issue miniseries examining both sides of a two-edged sword: love and hate. When five beings take up this sword, they find that perhaps it is more than any one of them can handle.

Their modest lives take high-speed turns as they slowly lose control of everything they hold dear. Caught up in the extreme emotion, their lives come crashing together. And, as might be

expected, not everyone makes it out alive.

Rotogin: Junkbotz is an eight-issue miniseries focusing on Kaylin Dakota, a young female gearhead living in the mega-city called Nalus Toyocom. Known as the "city of rings," Nalus is also home to a growing criminal organization known as the UBB, which sets up illegal robot tournaments using the city as a battleground.

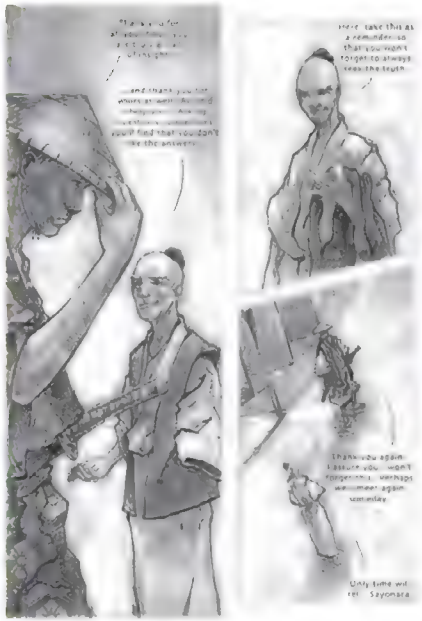
When debts owed to a crime lord go unpaid, Asian gang members threaten the life of one of Kaylin's friends. Rebuilding a battle bot of her own, Kaylin delves deep into the shady world of illegal robot tournaments and joins the UBB Fighters circuit in the hope of saving her friend. Now his fate lies in the hands of this young girl and her junk bot.

"YOU'VE COME TO FIGHT?"
YUP AND THEY'RE GONNA TEAR THE PLACE UP WHILE THEY DO IT, TOO
GODDAMN SAVAGES!
"HEY MOM" I'M HAPPY THIS WHOLE CITY'S A JUNK-HEAP!
WELL GUESS IT MAKES FOR GOOD ENTERTAINMENT

Soul of the Samurai is a four-issue, bimonthly miniseries that deals with the spiritual journey of a young samurai willing to forsake rank and honor in order to achieve his ultimate goal of enlightenment. Along the way, he is forced to face his four inner demons, each of which represents a different piece of his soul.

With each new discovery bringing more agony than bliss, he realizes that sometimes knowledge of the self can come at a high price, especially when you are your own worst enemy.

All four titles are scheduled to ship in April.



A selection of artwork from the manga series. Above: a typical attempt at luring some unsuspecting comics fan into making a mess over the cover of his latest manga book. This isn't hi-brow this is manga and if that means thrusting hips as well as intelligent stories who are we to argue? To the left some unusual and evocative black and white artwork from **Soul of the Samurai** and beyond that is interior art from **Rotogin: Junkbotz**. All good stuff!

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

MIRANDA

LANCE Parkin is an author best known for his Doctor Who novels [*Just War*, *Cold Fusion*, *The Dying Days*, *The Infinity Doctor*, *Father Time*, *Trading Futures*], but has also written spin-off novels and a best-selling coffee-table book derived from the long-running UK soap opera *Emmerdale*, as well as audio plays for the companies Big Finish and BBV. Although a big comics fan, **Miranda** is the first comic strip Parkin has had published, though he also penned the **Pocket Essential Guide to Alan Moore**.

Allan Bednar is a freelance illustrator, and has worked for a number of computer games companies such as Infogrames and Rage as a concept artist and 3D modeller, most recently with Revolution Software, developers of such games as *Beneath A Steel Sky* and the *Broken Sword* series. In comics, he has been published in the likes of **2000AD** and DC/ Paradox Press' **Big Book of Urban Legends**. In the arena of *Doctor Who*, his art has graced the pages of *Walking In Eternity* [edited by yours truly] and *Missing Pieces*, and online for BBCi, the web presence of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Comeuppance Comics, publisher of **Miranda**, are a recently formed publishing company, started by David Whittam [The Charm], Erik Pollitt [The Bank] and John Parkinson [The Common Sense]. Based in the UK, Whittam and Pollitt, along with their good friends Mssrs Tequila and Vodka, got talking about comics, and more specifically, why nobody was publishing any that they wanted to buy. In one of those 'it seemed like a good idea at the time' moments, they decided that they should remedy the situation by making their own. They were somewhat surprised to find that the next morning, when they'd sobered up, they still thought it was a great idea, and set to work. They started by recruiting John Parkinson, **Borderline**'s webmaster, to advise them on the comics industry, and started to look around for a suitable creative team. Whittam, Pollitt and Parkinson all came to know each other through a mutual appreciation of the television series Doctor Who, and Doctor Who fandom is particularly creative, with a tradition of fans becoming creators, and a lot of communication between the two. Knowing a lot of the Doctor Who novelists, it seemed obvious that they should look there for their creators, and it didn't take long to settle on fan-favourite Lance Parkin, and frequent collaborator, Allan Bednar.

BL: *Allan, I hear that you did a lot of your **2000AD** strips under pseudonyms. Why was that?*

AB: This was quite a few years ago now, I have to stress, about 5 or 6. I work full time in the computer games industry, and back at then I was paranoid about what my employer at the time would think. So I kept it a complete secret. As it turns out, I needn't have. My manager at the time was also doing work for **2000** on the sly, only he got discovered by the boss - and if anything, it only increased his stature in the company! So in a way **2000** was an education in more than just the artistic sense...

BL: *Lance - You wrote the **Pocket Essential Guide to Alan Moore**. How has feedback been to that, and do you have any desire to tackle anyone else in comics (or any other media that PE cover, for that matter) in the same manner?*

LP: The Alan Moore book is one of their biggest-ever sellers, and it's going to be reprinted in time for the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* movie. Oh, and there's now an Italian edition, which is the very definition of 'revised and expanded'.

LP: I'd love to do a Grant Morrison one, next, and keep mentioning it to the Pocket Essentials people.

BL: *Both - What have you previously collaborated on, prior to **Miranda**?*

AB: Our first collaboration as such was for the charity Who anthology *Missing Pieces*, where I drew an accompanying illustration to Lance's story *Iris Explains* which is absolutely hilarious. Then Lance and I devised a treatment for the cover to his [*Doctor*] *Who* novel *Father Time* (Miranda's first appearance by the way), which Black Sheep - the company which produces the range's covers - further developed and expanded upon. A lot of people think I did the cover, which is unfair to Black Sheep really, but it is true that without our collaboration it would've been an entirely different image. Our biggest collaboration though has to be the BBC's e-book project *The Dying Days*, which Lance should probably expound upon...

LP: Allan's done some fantastic illustrations for my stuff, the biggest gig being the pictures for the online *The Dying Days* on the BBC Cult site. *The Dying Days* is a *Doctor Who* book of mine that BBCi recently put up on their website - I was keen that we gave the fans something more

than just the text, so Allan illustrated it. Despite it all being a real rush job, I think the results are fantastic. The picture of the Ice Warrior being destroyed by the Doctor is, for my money, the most wonderful, archetypal Doctor Who image there's ever been.

BL: *Lance - You've done prose novels, audio plays, a video film script, worked on Emmerdale [what was the job title?], had a book adapted for serialization on the internet, and now comics. Are you trying to complete the set, or what?*

LP: I'm lucky enough to make a living through writing what I enjoy writing about, and on projects that really interest me. I've been a comics fan since I was a kid, and I've always wanted to write one.

BL: *Both - How did **Miranda** the comic come about?*

LP: We'd chatted on working together - we pitched a story to *Doctor Who Magazine* a couple of years back, with sample pages and everything, and never heard anything back from them. The Comeuppance people came along, and we all realised at roughly the same time that **Miranda** would make a great comic.

AB: Comeuppance Comics approached me to draw a title for them, and it instantly fell into place. I'd first contacted Lance a couple of years before with the idea of pitching a strip for *Doctor Who Magazine*. We'd always wanted to work on a comic together. So when this fantastic opportunity with Comeuppance arose, it was just heaven sent.

AB: Everyone at Comeuppance is so supportive as well. Everyone involved is really doing it for a love of the medium and to put out the kind of titles we would like to read ourselves. 'Labour of love' should be the company motto. Ether that or 'It's canon', for a laugh. [*Bednar refers to the hotly debated topic in Doctor Who fandom about canonicity, or what constitutes 'official' Doctor Who, which can often be taken to extremes, such as the stance that nothing after William Hartnell counts as 'real' Doctor Who...*]

BL: *Set the scene for us, if you will.*

LP: OK. Miranda is an ordinary English teenage girl who wakes up one morning and discovers she's not a normal teenage girl, she's actually the rightful Empress of the universe, billions of years in the future. The first issue of the comic shows her adjusting to this new life.

BL: *I imagine that some of our readers will be a little confused by the rights situation concerning unlicensed spin-offs from official BBC Books* Doctor Who *novels. Can you clarify?*

LP: The authors own the copyright in the text of their books, and can use anything they create in those books elsewhere - I managed to get characters from *Just War*, my first *Doctor Who* novel, into one of my *Emmerdale* books!

BL: *Lance - Readers who haven't read your Doctor Who novel Father Time will still be able to jump straight in with **Miranda**, won't they? Where does this story fit within the larger framework of Miranda stories you plan to tell?*

LP: I feel like there ought to be branching answers here. OK, if you're a comics fan, only read the first paragraph, if you're a Who fan, only read the second!

LP: The comic is completely standalone, and everything you need to know is right there in issue one - the last thing comics need is another title with a backstory you can't explain without a degree in Postmodernism and a thousand back issues.

LP: **Miranda** follows straight on from *Father Time*, the novel that had her first appearance (even if it doesn't seem to perfectly match up, it does, honest!). I'd like to reuse Miranda in the Doctor Who universe at some point, but that won't be for years and years, and what I've got planned for her won't interfere with or contradict the comic.

BL: *Looking at a pre-publication proof copy of **Miranda** #1, I couldn't help but be reminded of Alan Moore and Alan Davis' acclaimed run on **Captain Britain** for Marvel UK. Would you say that was a major influence on the two of you?*

LP: I like **Captain Britain**, and I'm not going to complain about being compared with Alan Moore! I think, like **CB**, **Miranda** falls into that British comics tradition that's a weird mix of *Doctor Who* and **2000AD**. 'Whimsical science fantasy', if you like. Or 'lots of cool robots and monsters', if you don't.

AB: I'd like to print that question out and hang it on my wall rather than answer it! How much do I owe you for asking it by the way?

AB: I think YES would be the short answer. On the art side, Alan Davis has been more than an influence on me, I'm proud to know him as a friend (although one I don't get to see as often as I'd like). He's taught me so much, not just about comics, but about approaching art or creativity, and there the 'lessons' if you can call them that get very big. I met him at the age of 15, at a quite impressionable time, and I kept asking him all of these huge 'meaning of life' questions, and he was kind enough not laugh or change the subject! The things he's taught me over the years have formed the way I approach most of what I do artistically, for storyboarding or character design, or whatever.

BL: *If **Miranda** were to lead to the two of you being headhunted by one of the major comics companies to work on one of their titles, what would you choose to work on?*

LP: Oh, ultimately, I'd love to write for Superman. Just about everyone who works for DC seems to believe that

old chestnut about how Batman's a much more interesting and human character, but, well, he isn't, is he? I'd love to see (indeed, write) a British perspective on the American Way - for my money, Superman's a timely symbol of a country that's got immense power but isn't always sure about the best way to use it. Superman symbolises the American myth of humble country folk going to the big city and making it the reality, these days, is that the big city folk come into the country to buy up the farms and local businesses. And I can't believe they've not got a monthly comic about Luthor being the president - The Lex Wing would be the best comic on the market.

AB: If that opportunity ever arose - predictable answer alert - but obviously every artist would love to draw Batman! I've also a huge fondness for Daredevil as a character as well. I love Moore's 'Tom Strong' at ABC. For sheer enjoyment, I'd love to get to draw Captain Britain, the 'classic' version, as a bit of a homage but also because I loved the stories so much growing up. Although the pedigree of that character might freeze me up a bit! It would also be cool to get to do a Dredd.

LP: I'd love to write **Wonder Woman**. A great female character, one that everyone in the world recognises, with all sorts of wonderfully accessible history (like the WW2 stuff and the Greek myth stuff). **Wonder Woman** ought to be the mainstream title in comics, but every time I pick it up, it seems to be in the middle of something about time travel or men being turned into animals by an evil sorceress.

LP: I'm a big fan of the **Teen Titans**. I've got every episode of *Battle of the Planets* on tape. **Iron Man**'s always struck me as a great character. Oh, and I had a great idea for a **Painted Doll** one-shot the other day.

LP: I love the superhero titles, and I think they've had a bad press recently. I think a lot of people complaining about superheroes are fighting yesterday's battles – half the superhero comics I buy now are actually cop shows, like **Powers** or **Gotham Central**. And more than half the comics I buy are things like **100%**, **Queen and Country** or **Three Days in Europe**. Those are fantastic, don't get me wrong, but it seems like superheroes are an endangered species, these days. **Superman** was always about emotional jeopardy, not physical jeopardy - you can't put him in physical jeopardy, the things that always worried him were his girlfriend, his relationships, his job and people finding out his secrets.

BL: *What can you tell us about other current and future projects the two of you have lined up?*

LP: Very little at the moment! If **Miranda** sells, I'd love to do more comics for Comeuppance, and we've already talked about the next one.

AB: I'm very happy to be working for Revolution Software, on everything from character design, concept design, and storyboarding, to the user interface and icons for *Broken Sword 3*. It's a beautiful looking game already, with both a very intricate narrative and strong action sequences, and I can't wait to play the finished product!

AB: For Lance and I in the immediate future, everything pretty much depends on the response to **Miranda**! There may be more from us on BBCi in the future as well. But I think we should collaborate on something completely different next, like a Delia Smith recipe or something. We really should fix the broken cupboard in my kitchen, because I'm terrible at DIY.

Miranda #1 was launched with a couple of public appearances at specialist scifi shops London's 10th Planet and Norwich's Kulture Shock. If **Miranda** sells well, Comeuppance plan to release further titles based on creator-owned properties with Doctor Who connections, the first such being **The Adventures of Iris Wildthyme** by Paul Magrs and *Doctor Who Magazine* artist Adrian Salmon, and later on, a number of other projects in various stages of development. Comeuppance hope to be in a position to look at unsolicited proposals from new writers and artists further down the line, once they are firmly established.

Miranda is a six issue miniseries, available from selected retailers and online direct from the publisher at: *www.comeuppancecomics.co.uk* Individual issues are £2.25 each inclusive of p&p, with a discount for total series subscribers. Issue #2 is scheduled for release this month.

PAUL & FERNANDO'S WEIRD ARCHIE ADVENTURE

***BORDERLINE**'S newest recruit,* Superheronews *guru, Rik Offenberger caught up with Archie Comics' Paul Castiglia and Fernando Ruiz. Paul is the writer of **Archie's Mysteries**, formerly **Archie's Weird Mysteries**; a title aimed a slightly older then average Archie reader. He is also a freelance editor at Archie, in charge of the trade paperback reprint program, including the historic Archie Americana series. Fernando Ruiz is the artist on **Archie's Mysteries** and **Archie Digest**. Fernando is also an instructor at the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art in Dover, NJ. Paul and Fernando chatted with us about their history at Archie and their plans for 2003.*

Borderline: *When did you first become familiar with the Archie character?*

Paul Castiglia: I grew up in the early 1970s, where the Saturday morning cartoon line-ups were anchored by one of the many Filmation Archie animated TV series of the decade. I was definitely exposed to Archie on TV before I had ever seen an Archie comic. The first Archie comics I read were the Spire Christian Archie comics that were given away at church. The great thing about those was, I had an allowance which I used to buy other comics, and my Mom would buy me the Archie Christian comics as gifts because she looked at them differently than regular comics because of the content. So I was exposed to a lot of comics growing up.

Fernando Ruiz: I first discovered Archie when I was a kid reading my older brother's Archie comic books. I started out reading Harvey comics like **Richie Rich**, **Casper the Friendly Ghost**, etc. This is back in the late 70s and early 80s when I was about nine to ten years old. In those days, if you can believe it, the four biggest presences on the comic racks were DC, Marvel, Harvey, and Archie. I started out with Harvey, moved onto Archie, and then graduated onto superhero books.

BL: *What do you find the most challenging about working on Archie?*

PC: The most challenging aspect is staying faithful to the characters. This is especially hard because sometimes the situations you concoct lend themselves to great jokes and one-liners, but you have to ask yourself, "would Dilton actually say that?". It's harder than it sounds, and I (and many of the other writers) don't always get it right, but I do my best to keep it in mind. It's especially important to me since I've been exposed to the evolution of these characters through my archiving duties at Archie and editing the Archie Americana paperback series of classic reprints.

FR: At first, the biggest obstacle, as with most established licensed characters, is getting that likeness down. The characters HAVE to look just like who they're supposed to be and Archie, the company, has what's called a "house style", which means that all artwork has to have a certain uniformity in terms of style. Archie has to look like the Archie everyone recognizes. I couldn't for example go in and redesign the look and style the character is drawn in. Adapting to this house style is something I had to get used to.

BL: *Was Archie your first job in comics, and how did you get the job at Archie?*

FR: Archie was my first job right out of art school. I was in my third and final year as a student at The Joe Kubert School of Cartoon And Graphic Art. Every year, the school invites different comicbook companies to the school to review their graduating students' portfolios. One of my teachers at the school was Hy Eisman, who had worked for Archie before and had given us an assignment where we had to draw an Archie story. He liked my pages and encouraged me to show them to Archie editor, Victor Gorelick, when he came to the school. I did and Victor liked what I could do so he hired me right out of the school. I was very lucky. I graduated from school and the next week I was working on my first Archie story.

PC: I graduated from The School of Visual Arts (SVA), hoping for a career in comics or animation. Taking stock of my abilities, I realized I was lacking in the essentials - I really didn't have a good handle on perspective, anatomy or composition. However, I was good at drawing thumbnail sketches and

Above: Paul Castiglia at a recent show in the USA. Left: The Archie logo on the Archie Building. Over: Paul standing outside the Archie offices. (All photos by Ken Penders & Ron Bauerle - more info from www.kenpenders.com)

could put them together to tell a story, so I decided to create a portfolio of "picture scripts." Since humor was my strength, I concentrated on writing stories with funny characters. My goal was to get either storyboard work in animation or kids' comic writing assignments. I caught wind of the fact that one of my teachers at SVA, the late, great Joe Orlando, was going to be editing a magazine featuring *Looney Tunes* characters for DC Comics. I dropped off my sample picture scripts and soon after Joe gave me an assignment. Writing those first scripts was exciting, but certainly not enough to live on - after all, these were 1 and 2-page puzzle and craft pages. So I called the local comic companies each week to see if they had any editorial openings. After an interview at Harvey and two at Marvel, I had a fateful interview at Archie. They were looking for an editorial assistant and archivist. They hired me on the spot, and the rest is history.

BL: *Fernando, how did you go from student to instructor at the Joe Kubert School?*
FR: A year after I graduated, I was asked to take over the school's Saturday morning class. A year after that, I was asked to join the faculty full time. I was a graduate of the school. I still lived close to the school and I was working in the field so that made me a qualified candidate to teach there!

BL: *What is it like to work at Archie?*
FR: It's a great gig. It's always good to be able to make a living at something you enjoy and I'm doing that now. The work is fun, and even better, it's steady. A lot of freelancers tend to drift in between assignments but with Archie, every week they give me something to do and luckily, it's been like that for going on nine years this year.

BL: *How do you approach storytelling?*
PC: I generally provide a full script. For the latest, "un-weird" incarnation of this series, I have a collaborator, Barbara Jarvie, and we start with a plot idea and then flesh out the "steps" that go into solving the mystery. We then do tons of research to back up the investigative techniques and write the full script including dialogue. It then goes to Fernando Ruiz. Fernando is great, because he is able to expand upon our descriptions - if there is a better way visually to depict what we want, he goes for it! He also peppers his art with great minutiae in the backgrounds - little nods to pop culture, fads, previous issues, etc.
FR: I like working with Paul. We know each other and get along well so if there's ever any changes that need to be made or any questions we can just call or e-mail each other. Usually, I draw the chapters of an **Archie's Mysteries** story as he writes them so I may be drawing chapter one as he's writing chapters two and three.

BL: *You started with **Archie's Weird Mysteries**, did the tie-in with the cartoon limit the stories you could tell?*
PC: The original **Archie's Weird Mysteries** format was the result of an animated TV series from DIC which ran on the PAX network in 1999 and 2000. The best thing about it was this was a universe where anything could happen - Riverdale had become a "weirdness magnet" and story possibilities seemed limitless. The worst thing was that anything could happen - but it often happened inexplicably, without due explanation. Many of the comic stories I wrote reflected this - some for the better, some to their detriment. Ultimately, it became played out, which is one of the reasons I often deviated from the show with goofier stories revolving around clones of Archie or a robot girlfriend that were more comical than menacing.
FR: Actually, I thought it was less limited when we were doing the **Weird Mysteries** book. The stories could be about anything from UFOs to giant lobsters. Maybe it was just too unlimited as you might guess from giant lobsters.

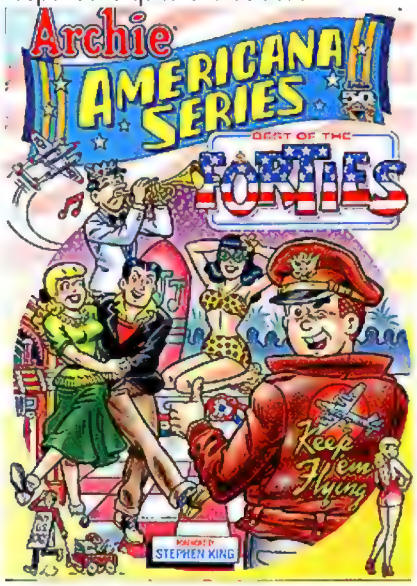
BL: *Was **Archie's Weird Mysteries** treated like a regular Archie title?*
FR: At first, it seemed a bit different because we were working with a different editor and he was more interested in keeping the book closer to the **Weird Mysteries** cartoon and in keeping the book consistent with the rest of the Archie line. Through it all though I never got the feeling that it was any less legitimate than the other titles.
PC: The publishers hope they all will do well!

BL: *Is the Archie in your comic the same Archie that appears in all the other Archie titles?*
PC: Archie's Mysteries works because, even though it applies serious investigative techniques from the adult world, it marries those techniques to the long-established Archie characters.

For example, Chuck is the forensic artist, Dilton a forensic scientist and Veronica is the financial investigator. The characters readers have come to know and love haven't been changed; if anything, we're playing up their strengths by having the kids put them to best use.
FR: I don't think we're going to be seeing any crossovers or any references being made, but given the amount of respect Paul has for Archie history and tradition, I 'm sure the Archie he writes is the Archie we're reading in all the other books. This isn't Ultimate Archie or anything like that.

BL: Why have you dropped the "weird" from **Archie's Mysteries**?
Fernando: AWM was getting a little *too* weird. Once the faux-Pokemon creatures started showing up, our editor, Victor, knew it was time to restore a little focus to the book. Then Paul had this cool idea for Archie and his Teen Scene Investigators and he ran with it!

Paul: The comic was published in support of the *Archie's Weird Mysteries* TV show and conversely, we looked upon the TV show as something that would drive the comic's sales. Since the show was no longer in first-run and we were starting to stretch the "paranormal" theme thin in the comics, it was decided we'd "un-weird" it and try our hands at more believable mysteries. At first, this meant a standard Scooby Doo approach where the supernatural was revealed to be nothing more than a con game. I didn't really want to do a Scooby knock-off, however (one of my pet peeves in the first year of the series was people calling it a Scooby rip-off - when interviewed, I'd often point out that Archie and the gang were facing off against real ghosts, aliens and vampires, unlike the Scooby crew), so inspired by all the real-life forensics shows on cable as well as *C.S.I.*, I suggested we make Archie and friends into G-rated forensic detectives! Granted, the series is more *Monk* in tone than the grislier true crime-based shows and movies, but it works. Early response is quite enthusiastic.



BL: *What do you think the readers are going to appreciate the most about the change from* ***Archie's Weird Mysteries*** *to* ***Archie's Mysteries*** *and why should people who maybe haven't been reading Archie comics check out* ***Archie's Mysteries****?*
PC: It's actually a great "tween" comic for kids who are ready to move on from typical Archie fare but not quite ready to dive into DC and Marvel superheroes. It bridges the gap in between, and in an industry where "tweens" are barely addressed - well, I think it's a benefit that I'm more than happy to spread the word about. It's my hope that people beyond the usual Archie demographics will take to this series, as I believe it really has something to offer everyone. I'm hoping this is the Archie comic even die-hard superhero fans won't mind being caught reading. Conversely, I'm hoping the factoids inspire kids to want to explore and learn more about their world. We do a ton of research for this series - we pore through forensic books and surf forensic websites - hopefully it shows. Perhaps that fact will rub off on the youth and they'll become great researchers, too! Not to mention enthralled with reading…
FR: The stories are a little more cerebral and rely less on the slapstick humor. It's still funny but also more intriguing and challenging.

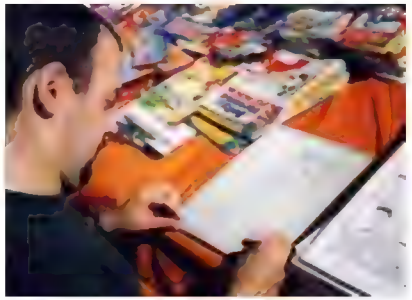
BL: *What type of freedom does it give you to separate yourself from the cartoon?*
PC: As previously mentioned, we're no longer tied in to the "anything goes" concept of the cartoon, and we can break away from the "investigating spooky doings" motif that has been overdone. We're charting new territory by having teens this involved in forensics. One of the things I'm most proud of is our first issue in the new format, **Archie's Mysteries** #25, actually hit the stands before the **C.S.I.** comic!
FR: Artistically speaking, I'm not held to the style guides of the cartoon anymore. *AWM*, the cartoon, had modified the looks of the characters and early on we tried to carry that look into the book. Now I'm free to draw Archie as I'm used to.

BL: *What are you looking forward to exploring with the new title, how will these ideals and dynamics make the material interesting for you and what's coming up for Archie in* ***Archie's Mysteries?***
PC: Well, the title is for all intents and purposes in its infancy, since the first "forensic" issue just came out and the next won't hit stands until 2003. This is basically "season one!" Fans can expect Archie and his friends to hone their investigative skills and occasionally a guest-star from the Archie universe with a specialty of their own may show up to aid the investigations. For me personally, the challenge is to see how many G-rated mysteries we can concoct for Archie and his friends to apply forensic techniques to! That's what makes it exciting. That and the fact that I think this is a pioneering effort for Archie comics in general and all-ages comics specifically. Forensics is usually a grisly affair, and yet we're showing that the principles of that discipline can even be applied to mysteries in a wholesome, parent-friendly comic series.
FR: I'm hoping for a little more adventure in the series without going too over the top. One of the things I like about the series is that it's very reminiscent of the *Little Archie* stories

I read as a kid and those smacked of *Jonny Quest* or **Tintin** adventures.

BL: *Are readers who have been with* ***Archie's Weird Mysteries*** *since the beginning going to be happy with the change to* ***Archie's Mysteries?***
PC: Like anything else, there are going to be diehard fans unhappy with the change. Whenever a drastic change is made to a comic, TV series or the like, there are always those who cry "blasphemy!" But there are also faithful who stick around to see how things progress and are often pleasantly surprised. And of course, you pick up new fans along the way. The hope is that the number of new readers exceeds those you lost!
FR: It's an intelligently written comic book where each issue is very accessible to new readers and doesn't enslave you into buying a hundred other books or titles. It's fun without preaching, pandering, or insulting anyone's intelligence. This is the thinking man's Archie!

BL: *What do you like the best about Archie?*
FR: I love the accessibility of the character. Everyone in the USA, whether they read Archie twenty years ago or they've never read him, knows what his books are about. It's a classic premise and as long as there are teenagers who fall in love, hang out with their friends, and drive their high school principals crazy, there's going to be material for endless Archie stories.
PC: Archie has hit upon a magic formula: the characters and stories depict the timeless trials and triumphs of growing up while simultaneously reflecting the fads and fashions of the times they are printed in. I call them retro-modern comics! Archie is timeless because the themes of being a teenager are universal despite the fact that times, styles and mores change. Teenagers in the 1950s experienced anxiety over tests, dating, getting a driver's license, etc.; just as teenagers today do. The type of car your dad drives may change, but the fear of denting it is a constant no matter when you grow up! These universal themes have certainly struck a chord. After all, Archie is one of only a few comic book titles that has been published uninterrupted since its golden age debut! That enduring quality really attracts me, but it's not the only reason Archie has been successful



Fernando Ruiz sketching at a convention.

for so many years. Consider these other reasons. Archie is about wish-fulfillment: Riverdale is the type of town most kids would love to live in; and our 6 to 12-year old readers can't wait to be teenagers, so they live vicariously through Archie, Betty, Veronica and the rest. Archie is a 60 plus year old brand name: parents know and trust Archie from their youth. They know the tales are wholesome and safe and they freely pass on their love for reading Archie comics to their children. Archie digests are amazing value and a staple at supermarket checkout aisles as well as in Wal-Mart, where they are among the most successful of all magazines sold there. It truly is an amazing property.

What made me really appreciate Archie Comics was my stint as assistant editor on the first Archie Americana paperback. I was assigned to research the original 1940s adventures to not only find the first appearances of all the major characters, but also to uncover stories exemplary of both the decade and the Archie mythology. It was then that I really began to appreciate the artistry... the genius... of Archie Comics. When you survey the history of the strip from its origins through its evolution into the Archie we know and love today, you begin to realize the skill involved in crafting these personalities and putting them through their paces, in terms of both the writing and the art. When I was in art school majoring in comics and animation, many of my peers looked down on Archie. When I started working at Archie, I can't tell you how many well-known writers and artists tried their hands at Archie and just couldn't get it right! That's when I realized Archie is the real deal - a major accomplishment in the history of comics, in my opinion. There is a misperception that writing and drawing Archie is easy. That just isn't the case - Archie is deceptively simple looking, but in execution is anything but.

Archie Comics as a company also works hard to make new fans and foster their interest through their website. *www.archiecomics.com* receives approximately 15 million hits and thousands of emails a month. Archie management personally answers each email to the website's "Talk Back" section. The website also sells a tremendous amount of Archie-related merchandise each month. These are the facts that aren't often published in direct-market comic shop circles - Archie is way more popular than the average comics fan might suspect.

BL: *Are there any other comics are you are dying to work on?*
PC: As far as Archie goes, I've had the pleasure of writing a few stories featuring their superheroes, the Mighty Crusaders, as guest-stars in **Archie's Weird Mysteries** as well as in this year's Halloween ashcan from Diamond. I'd love to do something on a more consistent basis with these characters. Beyond that, my favorite heroes are Plastic Man, the original (Shazam!) Captain Marvel and The Phantom. I'd love to try my hand writing any of these, especially since Plas and Cap lend themselves to my humorous approach and The Phantom is open to many interpretations. Of course, I wouldn't rule out a serious superhero story (which would be my approach on **The Mighty Crusaders**). Other dream projects would be writing new Archie Christian comics and doing what I consider the ultimate team-up: Batman, Daredevil and The Phantom. The jungle would never be the same! ☺

FR: I've always loved superheroes, action books, and sci-fi, so I'd love the opportunity to do anything along those lines. Within Archie, I'd love to be able to do more with the Mighty Crusaders. I'd also love it if Reggie got his own book!

BL: *What other projects are you working on?*
PC: Archie keeps me very busy with the **Archie's Mysteries** series, trade paperback projects, and the monthly solicitation and press release copy I write for them. Since the Archie Americana series **Best of the Fifties**, I've been editing the Archie line of trade paperback reprints which includes a whole series of Americana reprints by decade as well as **The Best of Josie and the Pussycats**, **The Shield: America's First Patriotic Superhero** and **Archie's Classic Christmas Stories**. On tap for 2003 are more paperbacks including reprints of early **Sonic** stories, silver age **Betty and Veronica** beach stories and last but not least, the stories that introduced the original Mighty Crusaders superhero team in 1962. This will hopefully be only the first of a few Mighty Crusaders paperbacks. Loving what I do, I'd of course entertain other projects - only time will tell. I do have some ideas for a Mighty Crusaders re-launch. Perhaps the success of the Crusaders-themed paperback reprints we're planning will make that viable. We'll see...
FR: Aside from **Archie's Mysteries** and various Archie Digest stories, I've just drawn a story for **Felix the Cat** and I write and illustrate an on-going serialized sci-fi comic strip called **The Scavengers**. It's available on the on-line sci-fi magazine *www.apocalypse fiction.com*. Check it out!

THE HISTORY OF ARCHIE COMICS

MAURICE COYNE, Louis Silberkleit and John Goldwater formed MLJ Magazines and started publishing in November 1939, deriving the company name from the initials of the partners' first names.

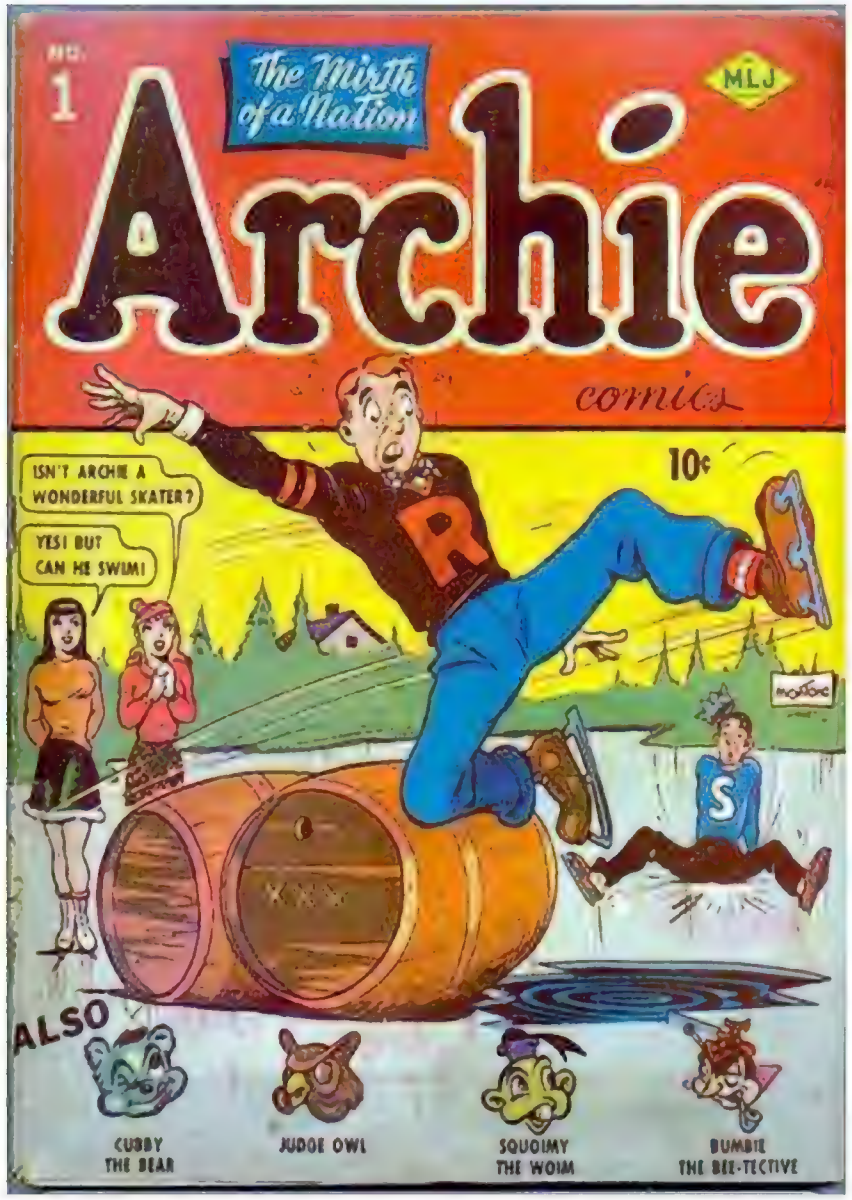
Coyne (September 15, 1901 - May 1971) had worked with Silberkleit in several publishing ventures. He also served as MLJ's bookkeeper and Chief Financial Officer. Silberkleit (November 17, 1900 - February 1986) had a college degree from St. John's University, was a licensed registered pharmacist, and also had a law degree from New York Law School. He was regarded as having an uncanny knack with circulation, was known for setting very tight distribution and for being an extremely tough negotiator with printers, distributors and separators. In the early 1930s Silberkleit, Maurice Coyne and Martin Goodman started Columbia Publications. Goodman soon left that company and it was then owned solely by Silberkleit and Coyne. Columbia was one of the last pulp companies, putting out its last pulp in the late 50s (only Pines' *Ranch Romance* ran longer). Silberkleit served as co-publisher of MLJ with Goldwater. Silberkleit's efforts were focused on the business, printing, separating, distribution and the financial end of the company. Columbia published westerns,

science fiction, detective, and romance, pulp magazines. Many of their writers who went on to become famous got their start working for Louis Silberkleit at Columbia Publications. Among these were Harold Robbins, Isaac Asimov, and Harry Sinclair Drago, to name a few.

John L. Goldwater (February 14, 1906 - February 26, 1999) grew up as an orphan in Harlem, New York. As a teen-ager he travelled the country working odd jobs. Eventually returning to New York, he began working loading magazines at the docks, before starting at Independent News, National Periodical Publications' (DC) distribution company, where he met Coyne and Silberkleit.

Goldwater started his own company, Periodicals for Export, Inc., and started buying unsold periodicals, mainly pulp magazines, from Silberkleit and exporting them for sale abroad. Observing the success of the Superman character in the infant comicbook industry in 1939, Goldwater joined Silberkleit and Coyne in launching a magazine publishing company. He served as editor in chief and co-publisher for MLJ, focused primarily on the editorial end of the business. He was one of the founders of the Comics Magazine Association of America, and served as its president for 25 years. The Comics Magazine Association of America is best known to comic fans for its Comics Code Authority. He was also a national commissioner of the Anti-Defamation League.

MLJ's first comic was **Blue Ribbon Comics**, published November 1939. The first issue was half colour, with the remaining pages red and white tints. In December 1941 **Top Notch Comics** was introduced. Then in January 1940, **Pep Comics** debuted featuring The Shield, America's first patriotic comic book hero, by writer Harry Shorten (the company's Managing Editor), and artist Irv Novick. The Shield was the cover feature for Pep Comics until, March 1944 when Archie became the dominant feature; the Shield continued in Pep Comics until January 1948. Also of note is the fact that The Shield predates Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America by 15 months, and his sidekick Dusty, from Pep Comics #11, January 1941, predates Bucky by 3 months.



Goldwater, inspired by the popular *Andy Hardy* movies starring Mickey Rooney, wanted to create a comic about a normal person to whom readers could relate. He created "America's newest boyfriend", Archibald "Chick" Andrews. In **Pep Comics** #22, December 1941, writer Vic Bloom and artist Bob Montana published Archie Andrews' first adventure. Gloria Goldwater, John's wife, said "He loved Superman and he wanted to create a kind of opposite to Superman. Archie was based partly on a red-headed friend of his named Archie. He also created Betty and Veronica. Then he decided Archie needed a real good friend. That was Jughead. It just grew and grew."

Goldwater created the idea of Archie. However, he was not an artist, so he went to the bullpen and asked the various artists to come up with a likeness. At age 21, Robert William Montana (Bob Montana) created the likeness of Archie and continued to draw Archie for 34 years, until his death on January 4, 1975.

As Archie's popularity grew MLJ Magazines changed its name to Archie Comics Publications. In the mid fifties the advent of television began to wipe out the pulp magazine. With slumping sales, Silberkleit and Coyne decided to discontinue Columbia Publications. Coyne stayed on at Archie as Chief Financial Officer until he retired in the 1970s. Silberkleit and Goldwater shared the same office, and ate lunch together for their entire business careers.

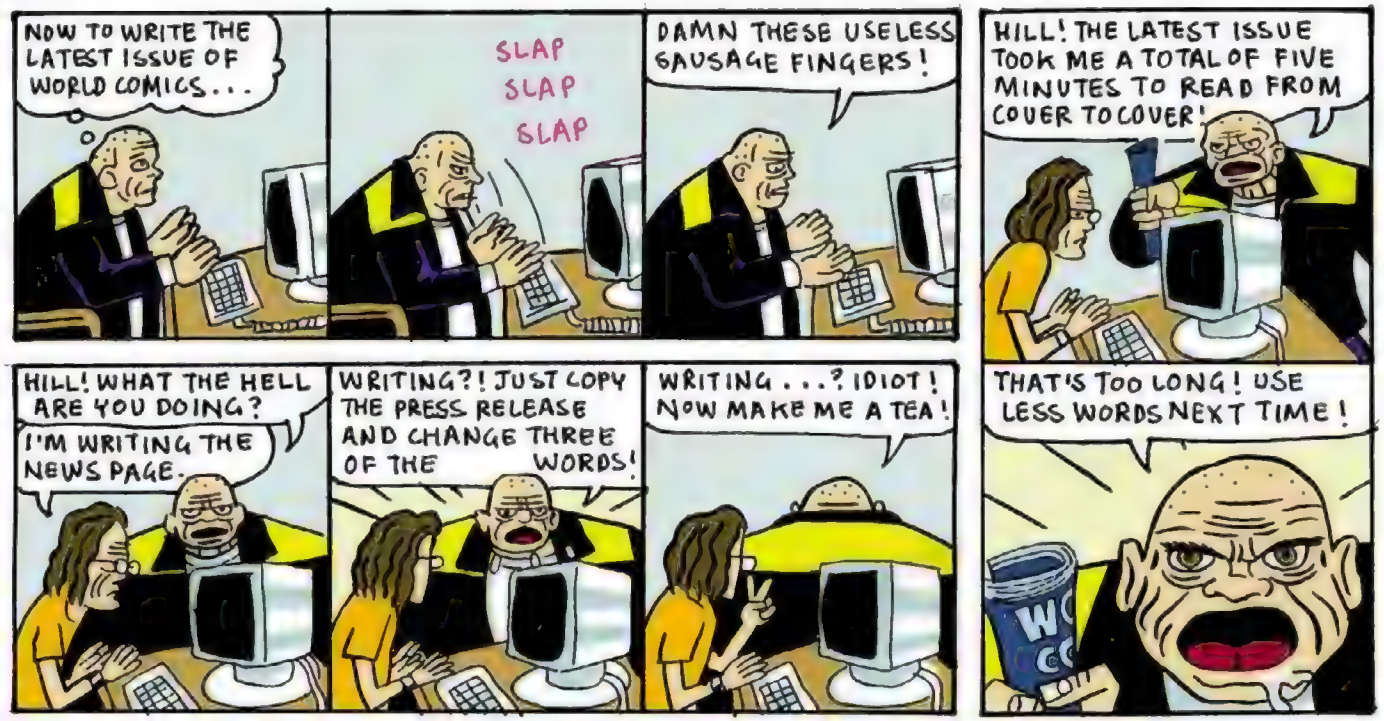
In the early 1970s, Archie Enterprises Inc. went public and just over ten years later Louis Silberkleit's son Michael and John Goldwater's son Richard took Archie Comic Publications back into private ownership. The company is solely owned by Michael Silberkleit, Chairman and Co-Publisher and Richard Goldwater,President and Co-Publisher. John L. Goldwater served as Honorary Chairman, a post he held until he died of a heart attack at his home in Manhattan in 1999.

Today, over 60 years after the founding of MLJ Magazines, Archie Comics Publications is a family business publishing wholesome family entertainment. Archie remains a major market force in the comic industry as a more than 15 million dollar a year company with only 23 full time employees and 30-40 freelance writers and artists, selling about 800,000 comic books a month. The Archie Comics website receives more than 18 million hits a month.

To visit Archie Comics on the web go to *www.archiecomics.com*

images provided by Shawn Clay

COMICS 2040
I SPEAK AS I FIND AND I FIND AS I SPEAK!
INTRODUCING DEN LESLIE, WORLD COMICS MAGAZINE EDITOR!
by Paul Rainey 1-03

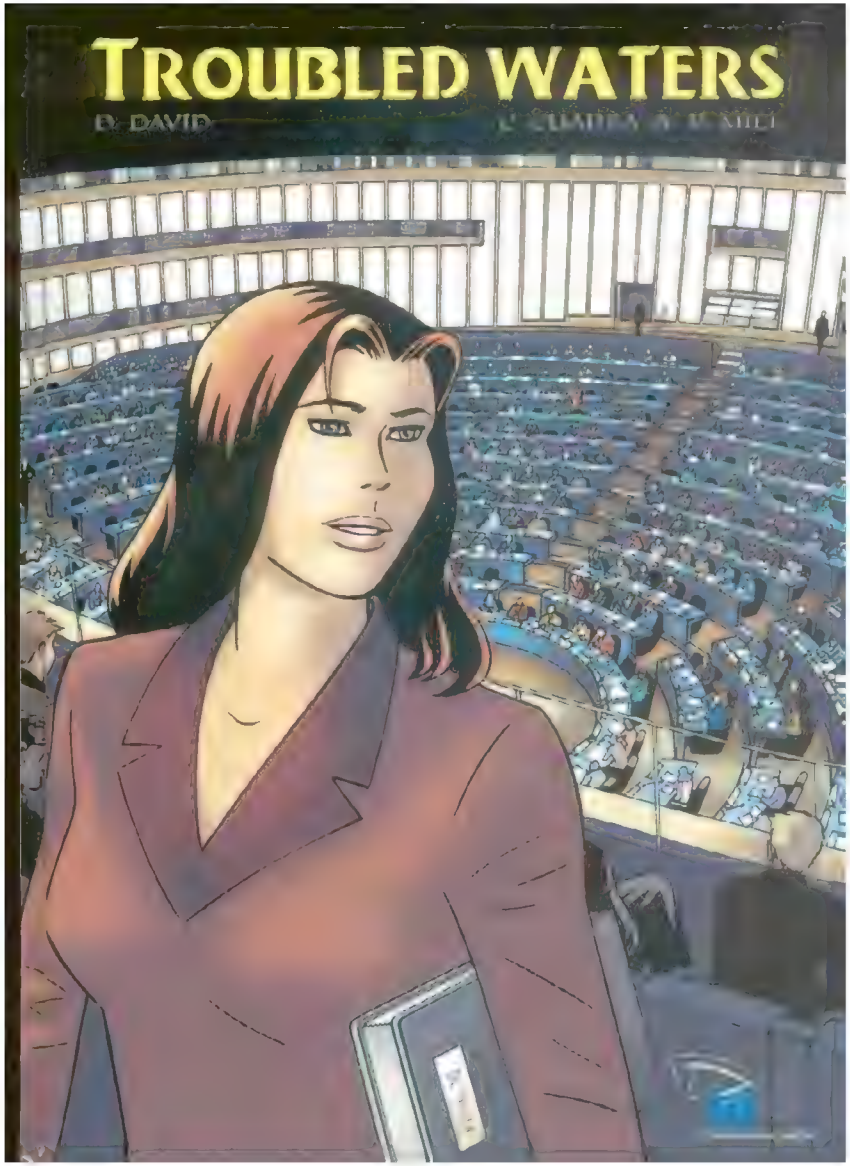

NOW TO WRITE THE LATEST ISSUE OF WORLD COMICS...
SLAP SLAP SLAP
DAMN THESE USELESS SAUSAGE FINGERS!
HILL! THE LATEST ISSUE TOOK ME A TOTAL OF FIVE MINUTES TO READ FROM COVER TO COVER!
HILL! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?
I'M WRITING THE NEWS PAGE.
WRITING?! JUST COPY THE PRESS RELEASE AND CHANGE THREE OF THE WORDS!
WRITING...? IDIOT! NOW MAKE ME A TEA!
THAT'S TOO LONG! USE LESS WORDS NEXT TIME!

FOREIGN
·COMICS· GRAPHIC NO
OH, HELLO DAN. HOW NICE TO SEE YOU.
YOUR CHEQUE FOR YOUR AD IS LATE!
OH GOD, YOU'RE RIGHT! THINGS HAVE BEEN MAD AROUND HERE! SORRY ABOUT THAT!
HERE YOU GO.
PUNCH!
KICK!
HIT!
LET THAT BE A LESSON TO YOU!

JEFF LOEB
IT'S PEE AITCH, NOT DOUBLE EFF!
JUST LOOK AT THIS FANTASTIC ART BY MY NEW ARTIST PARTNER, JIM LEE!
NOW, ALL I HAVE TO DO IS WRITE THE DIALOGUE...
CRACK
"BODY..."
TAP TAP
"...CHANGING..."
TAP TAP TAP
"...CHANGING INTO..."
TAP TAP
"...TEEN WOLF!"
TAP TAP TAP

POURING OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS

Mike Kidson and Jay Eales investigate a controversial comicbook...



ALMOST five years in the making, the European Parliament has published **Troubled Waters**, a free comic strip album, in order to help its constituencies better understand how the EP works.

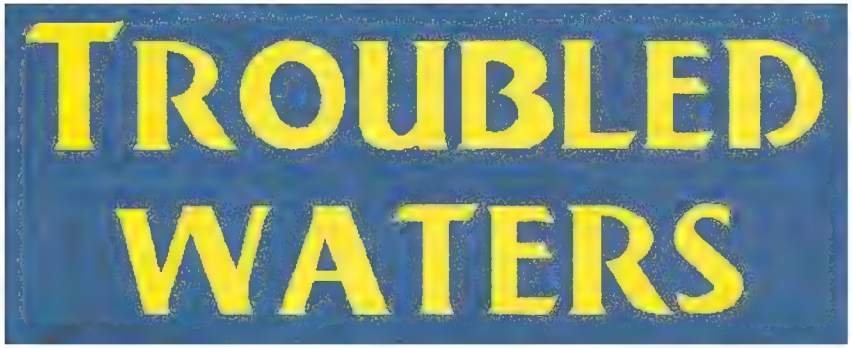
On May 15 1998, the European Parliament passed a resolution to target information packages at citizens of the European Union, in order to address the general feeling that the public doesn't understand the European Parliament. Although, one preconception that people may already have had of parliamentary procedure seems to have been borne out by the process, given the slow movement from concept to execution of the finished product!

In June 2000, the Director-General of Information and Public Relations initiated a feasibility study into using the comic strip medium as an informational tool. In 2001, the European Parliament extended an international invitation to tender proposals for a prospective book, the contents of which, it is decided, are to be based upon a real-life case – the September 2000 EP water policy resolution, and 600 pages of background documentation is made available to prospective participants.

The story was expected to simultaneously present the role and workings of the European Parliament and the role of an MEP, in as lively a manner as possible. The script had to highlight the European Parliament's key powers, with particular attention to its legislative role. This had to include major aspects of life at the European Parliament, its settings and atmosphere, lobbying by interest groups, the work of journalists, the secretariats of parliamentary committees, delegations to the Conciliation Committee, political groups, Members' assistants, multilingualism, interpreters/translators, and visitors, among other things. In short, quite a shopping list for any prospective contractor hoping to produce a satisfactory result at the end of the day.

In the end, Concerto, a Brussels-based multimedia agency, was awarded the contract. Concerto had already been involved in producing informational comics, previously being responsible for **Moi, Raciste** for the European Union, and work for the Belgian chemicals firm Solvay. Their proposal called for a 32 page comic in the standard Northern European album format, with an appendix of parliamentary terminology supplied by the European Parliament itself.

Concerto's founder and Managing Director Rudi Miel and Account Director, Cristina Cuadra collaborated on the script, and professional Belgian comics artist Dominique David was commissioned to illustrate the album. Every stage of the project was achieved in close cooperation between the authors and the European Parliament's Publications Unit. Likewise, the dialogue was meticulously fine-tuned in order to make sure that given the number of translations the book would require, no regional phraseology would slip in and potentially confuse readers from other European nations. In order to



faithfully depict the real locations in Brussels and Strasbourg, extensive photographic research was undertaken.

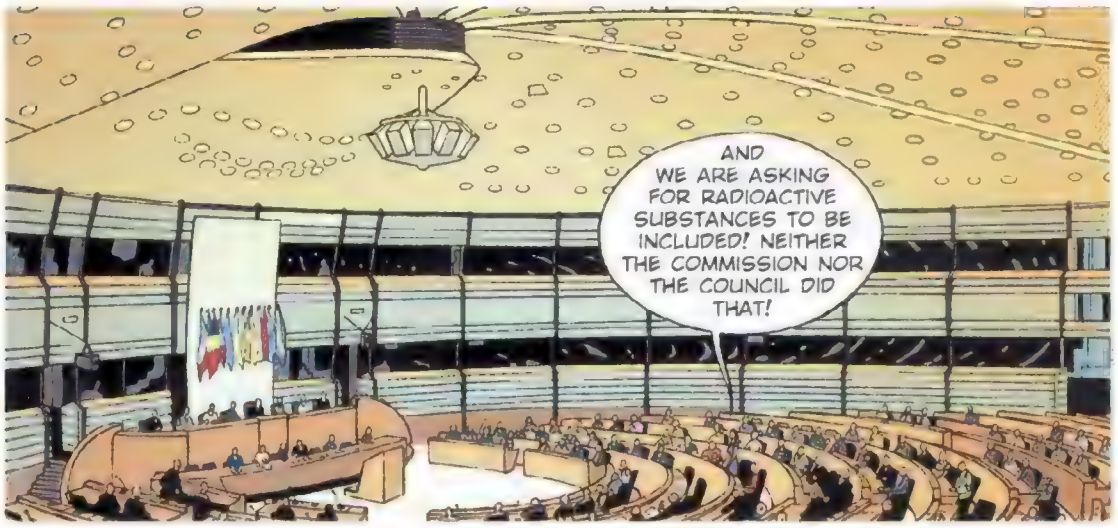
Miel is best known for his other comics work, as scripter of five volumes of **Les Aventures des Charlotte** (**The Adventures of Charlotte**) for Casterman and **L'Arbre des Deux Printemps** (**The Tree of Two Springs**) for Will and Co. **Troubled Waters** is Cuadra's first comic book project, but has since co-written **L'Ordre Impair** (**Odd Number Order**) with Miel, with artist P. Teng, for publication in June 2003. David has worked as a comics artist since the 1980s, most notably on the **Jimmy Boy** series published by Dupuis in the 90s, and more recently, Glenat's **Lipstick** series.

Targeting the 12-18 age group in particular, it was felt that the comic needed to include a thriller element, to avoid being too dry to hold the attention of its audience. The protagonist, Irina Vega is a fictional female MEP at the heart of the European Parliament's water resolution, who becomes tangled up in a whodunit plot about nefarious chemical companies illegally discharging hazardous waste into the rivers, and hostile takeover bids between two implicated companies.

December 2002 rolled around, and finally, **Troubled Waters/ Les Eaux Blessees** received its launch at a press conference in Brussels. Available to the general public from EU information distribution centres, beginning with French and English editions, with a print run of 150,000 copies in softcover and a limited run of 25,000 hardback editions, the next few months will see native language editions for the other EU member states. When added together, the final print-run will reach 1,250,000 copies in total, in 22 European languages. Readers of the newspaper *Eleftherotypia* (second national newspaper of Greece) will be able to read a serialisation of **Troubled Waters** ahead of the book publication.

With a planned appearance at the Angouleme comics festival set for late January, momentum was finally starting to build for the project, and then January 5th arrived, and the publication of weekly German news magazine **Der Spiegel**. In it's *Personalien* chat column, there was a paragraph about artist Dominique David, and an outline of the plot of the book, describing how "the powerful chemicals industry lobby uses mafia-like methods in attempting to undermine the proposals planned for the water resolution". This appears to have been adapted from the press kit distributed at the comic's launch, which contained the phrase "mafia-like death threats".

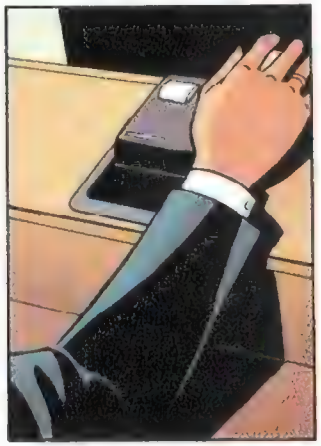
Over the next week, the **Der Spiegel** column was brought to the attention of CEFIC, the European chemical industry's lobbying organisation, leading CEFIC's Director-General, Alain Perroy to read Troubled Waters and write to European Parliament President Pat Cox with an urgent request that Troubled Waters be withdrawn "for fear that it will demonise" the chemicals industry. For a time, the wheels which had only just begun to turn at any kind of speed ground to a shuddering halt while CEFIC and the EP discussed compromise solutions.

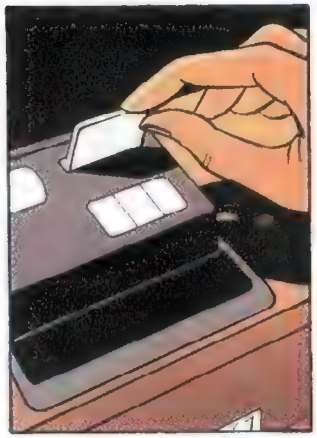


Picking up on the story, on January 11th, Belgian Dutch language daily newspaper **De Morgen** ran an article by Nathalie Carpentier, outlining CEFIC's complaints. Over the course of the feature, Carpentier interviewed CEFIC's press officer Marc Devisscher, who expressed amazement at an official EU publication "painting such a negative picture of the chemicals industry, one which bears no resemblance to reality", and suggested that the EU was supposed to be rather more impartial. Carpentier also interviewed Kathleen Van Brempt, a Belgian Social Democrat MEP and member of the EP Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport, who dismissed CEFIC's claims as "ridiculous" and pointed out that **Troubled Waters** was about the EP's procedures, not the chemicals industry, and suggested that the chemicals industry was acting stupidly in aligning itself with a general trend towards the hindrance of EP activities.

The same day, Van Brempt commented on the *www.politics.be* website, that this was not the first time that CEFIC "has attempted to intimidate the EP", adding that one compromise solution that was under consideration was to affix a sticker to the cover of each album explaining that **Troubled Waters** was a fictional story.

Algemeen Dagblad, a Dutch daily paper picked up the story on January 13th, while Dutch Green Party MEP Alexander De Roo asked in Parliamentary session for **Troubled Waters** to be made available, and for translated editions in other languages to be





produced. EP President Pat Cox announced that the comic had not been cancelled, and that further translations "in all official European languages" would appear in due course. The next day, De Roo commented on the Dutch Green Party website (*www.groenlinks.nl*) that CEFIC's reaction to the comment did not reflect well on the chemical industry's activities. By the 22nd January, British newspaper **The Independent** had a handle on the story, and ran a piece which stressed the positive nature of the EP's attempt to publicise its procedures using the comics medium. The dispute with CEFIC was mentioned only in passing.

The next day, during the 30th Angouleme comics festival, chaired by Francois Schuiten, **Troubled Waters** was awarded the *Prix Alph-Art de la Communication*, just as CEFIC and the EP reached agreement on a compromise, allowing copies of the album to be distributed throughout the three-day festival, and thereafter at EU information centres. Inside each copy of the book is a slip of paper stating: "Although the adventures portrayed in this story are entirely fictional, the procedures described accurately reflect reality".

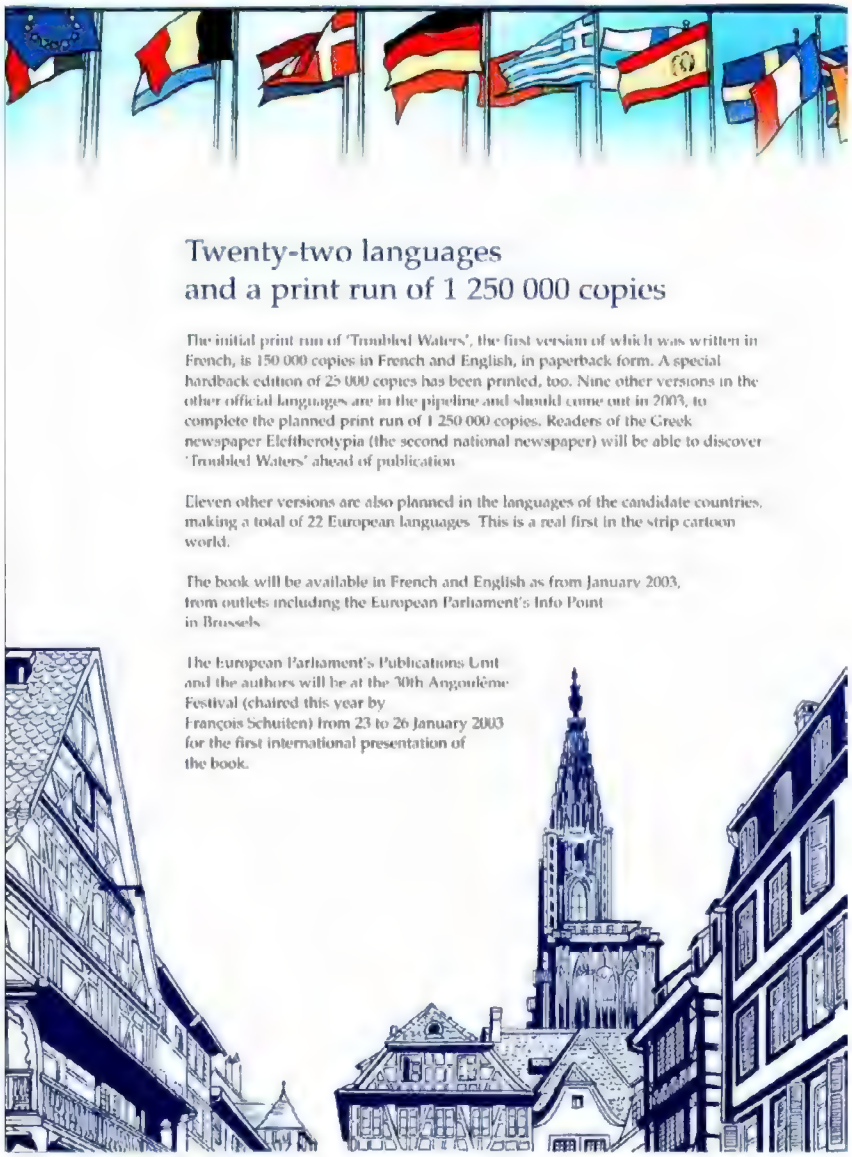
Whether the publication and critical success greeting **Troubled Waters** will lead to wider acceptance of the medium as a tool to present serious issues across Europe remains to be seen. After all, most of Europe *already* took the medium seriously, so they may be preaching to the converted. As per usual, it's the British who continue to wear their blinkers when it comes to comics, despite it being all around them every time they visit anywhere that information can be presented in pamphlet form. Schools, the Doctors' surgery, or the dentist, aeroplane safety guides - even the do-it-yourself instructions that come with their new IKEA furniture, where comic strip illustration can be held up as a prime (visual) example of the old saying: "A picture's worth a thousand words".

RUDI MIEL

Rudi Miel was born in Tournai – the headquarters of **Tintin**'s famous publisher – on 19 January 1965, so his first series **Les Aventures des Charlotte** (**The Adventures of Charlotte**) (over the course of five books) was, of course, published by Casterman. He also provided the script for **L'arbre des Deux Printemps** (**The Tree of two Springs**), which was illustrated by Will & Co (published by Lombard in its **Signe** collection), and was voted the best foreign strip cartoon book at the Sobreda Strip Cartoon Book Festival in Portugal in 2001. With Cristina Cuadra he is co-writing **L'Ordre Impair** (**Odd Number Order**), illustrated by P. Teng, which will be published by Lombard in June 2003. A journalism graduate, he pursued further education at the Solvay Business School and has run the Concerto agency, which he founded, since 1992.

CRISTINA CUADRA GARCIA

Troubled Waters marks Cristina Cuadra's first involvement with strip cartoon work. She was born on 27 August 1968 and graduated in geography and history from Complutense University in Madrid. She pursued her quest for new horizons at Columbia University in New York, Paris I-La Sorbonne and ULB in Brussels. Her experience with European projects, which she manages at the Concerto agency, and her interest in the historical and political aspects associated with European integration, made her the ideal co-author for this project. She's developed a taste for this kind of work, because she and Rudi Miel are co-writing **L'Ordre Impair** (**Odd Number Order**), which will be published in June 2003.



Twenty-two languages
and a print run of 1 250 000 copies

The initial print run of 'Troubled Waters', the first version of which was written in French, is 150 000 copies in French and English, in paperback form. A special hardback edition of 25 000 copies has been printed, too. Nine other versions in the other official languages are in the pipeline and should come out in 2003, to complete the planned print run of 1 250 000 copies. Readers of the Greek newspaper Eleftherotypia (the second national newspaper) will be able to discover 'Troubled Waters' ahead of publication.

Eleven other versions are also planned in the languages of the candidate countries, making a total of 22 European languages. This is a real first in the strip cartoon world.

The book will be available in French and English as from January 2003, from outlets including the European Parliament's Info Point in Brussels.

The European Parliament's Publications Unit and the authors will be at the 30th Angoulême Festival (chaired this year by François Schuiten) from 23 to 26 January 2003 for the first international presentation of the book.

DOMINIQUE DAVID

Dominique David was born in Charleroi on 12 December 1960 and trained in the Illustration department of the Institut Saint-Luc in Brussels, as a result of which her first books were published by Dupuis, the publisher of authors of the celebrated Marcinelle school (Peyo, Roba, Will, Morris, etc). Her series **Jimmy Boy** (in five books published between 1990 and 1995) relates to the adventures of a young boy in working-class America in the 1920s. The new character whose adventures she relates and illustrates is a whodunit heroine called **Lipstick**. The third **Lipstick** story, **La None Rafle Tout** (**The Nun Makes A Clean Sweep**), has just been published by Glenat.

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SPOILER WARNING

Sometime columnist Ande Morgenson ponders an Internet phenomena...

WHEN I first moved to the United Kingdom from Denmark in the mid-1970s, not only was I introduced to the 3-day week, power cuts and lots of rubbish; I was also introduced to the wonderful world of comicbooks. Having a Scottish mother meant I could speak very good 'English' by the time I started school and comics were devoured by me and my sister.

By the late 1970s, I had discovered **Fantasy Advertiser** and **BEM** and these two British fanzines opened my eyes to the fact that the Spider-Man, Avengers and Fantastic Four strips I loved were actually reprints of stories years ahead in the United States. This, like the fact that *Star Wars* had been released in America weeks before it had in the UK made me pretty envious of anyone into the things I was into who lived in the States. To American readers this might be difficult to grasp, but it's something like discovering a number of bands you like *all* have secret back catalogues of music that is to die for and, for me, as a teenager, this back catalogue was almost endless.

Thinking back, I'm quite glad that continuity wasn't as convoluted or as saturated as it is now. Because Marvel and DC really embraced the idea of 'ongoing continuity' in the mid-1980s and while that introduces an entirely new potential readership, it also began the steady erosion of the aging comics fan's devotion and obsession. The introduction of the impression of moving a comics series forward also introduced the readers' desire to know what happens next and unlike soap operas comics has a totally annoying habit of either never fully concluding many subplots, or, in the case of many Marvel titles, changing the past to suit the present. I read a few issues of the **Fantastic Four** the other day and I'm confused: is this the Fantastic Four who went into space with Lee and Kirby at the helm? Or is this the FF who had the **Heroes Reborn** revamp by Jim Lee in 1995? Are they the same? How does all the continuity fit? Why is it necessary to end up leaving many readers completely nonplussed? The reason I use this as an example, even though it was fairly obvious to me that **Heroes Reborn** wasn't a reboot as far as the Marvel continuity is concerned – it was a marketing ploy that at times either resembled or retold the original series.

Now, I know I should just be sitting down and simply enjoying a good read, but unfortunately this continuity aspect of the good read was introduced by Marvel and it would be suicidal for comics companies to return to the days of Silver Age DC – where every story could be an imaginary one. We're too sophisticated for that now. Popular comics series hold as much interest for many of their fans as TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, Babylon 5* or even *24* or *The West Wing*. Any sophisticated soap opera, whether it is SF or primetime, always threatens to isolate the casual viewer by having too much 'baggage' between the characters. *Star Trek* always managed to make the hardened SF opera fan think that the show's main characters only interacted when

Which Fantastic Four is this?
Is continuity killing the fan's obsession?

the camera was switched on. They spent God knows how many years together and it wasn't until the films started that they even started to act like they knew each other. But that's an aside; the point is the TV shows that gain extensive cult followings tend to be ones that are ongoing stories rather than isolated incidents. I'm surprised the *Murder She Wrote* format is still worth doing. The **X-Men** was the most successful comic in the 1980s and 1990s not specifically because it had the best artists, but because people wanted to know what the hell was going on. It wasn't *Twin Peaks* but it was *Dallas*!

In the 1970s, when I read that Phoenix was going to be KILLED OFF, this was a major revelation and when I finally got my grubby hands on **X-Men** #137 I was completely underwhelmed. Two years earlier I'd read the death of Gwen Stacey and even though it had happened two years earlier *I didn't know!* And because I didn't know it was like an axe had hit me. I felt that same thrill when I learnt of Jean Grey's imminent expiry, but I don't know if it was just Claremont and Byrne's failure to pull it off or my lack of empathy with the characters now that I had prior knowledge of their fate, I can't be sure. But I think it might be the latter. The things that have shocked me most in both TV series and comics have been the things I had no prior knowledge of – this is also why life can be so much more unbelievable than fiction at times. Once you introduce prior knowledge, it doesn't matter how well the story is told it can never have the same impact, nor can it hope to. I was never aware that Jenny Calendar, Giles's would be girlfriend in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was going to die (and the way she did, to boot) during season two of that series and when it happened I was completely pole axed. However, I'd inadvertently strayed onto one of them news sites a few years ago, shortly after *Angel* had started in the US and I learned that Doyle, the demon sidekick of Angel's – a character I hadn't even seen yet because the show hadn't made it to the UK – was going to die halfway through the first season. So when it happened, well, let's just say that by the time it happened I'd become disappointed – not with Joss Whedon (the series creator and writer), but with the fact it has become so important for *us* to know major events before they happen. The websites that have appeared in this Internet age and exist purely to hype forthcoming events have arguably taken the real excitement out of lives of the sorry fans, who lust after knowledge that somehow is never going to have the same effect had it been genuinely unexpected.

The end of innocence? The death of Jean (Marvel Girl) Grey was the first major death reported months before it happened. Did this cause the fan to start to lose the sense of something special?

Which brings us to the title of this issue's little column – Spoiler Warning. A phenomenon of the Internet message forums and something that generates enough blank space to fill the void that sits outside of time and space. A prerequisite if you want to stay one step behind all the smart arses who have either seen the offending item or have tons of prior knowledge. The USA not only gets films and television series before the rest of the world, it also gets its own comics. Now you could say that because these fair people produce these things there should be no argument that they get them first. This wouldn't be a problem if comics, films and TV were made solely for a US market, but we're a global market now and unfortunately this article would go off into all kinds of directions if I let it. Essentially there will always be a time lag for the rest of the world behind the USA when it comes to the things the rest of the world care about that originate there.

With comics the spoiler warning has taken on a new dimension. In the past it was almost a prerequisite for the publishers to leak information about changes and major events, but it got to the point where the hype became more important than the event and, of course, the more hyped an event the bigger the let down at its conclusion. DC Comics took an active stance against this, banning creators from talking about storylines and keeping things secret and what happened? I don't see much of DC anywhere else other than its own site. Yeah, there's talk about the books and speculation, but the traffic just doesn't seem to be there any more. It's probably had a negative effect. I should think trying to hype Superman every week on the basis of the character alone is a bit like being the smallest scarecrow in the biggest, most crow-infested cornfield in the world – futile. But, despite no longer liking the fact I'm going to have prior knowledge of the future of my own personal fantasy world, I also acknowledge that without some knowledge the media ends up ignoring you and I'm no different from anyone else reading this, I like to see what I'm going to spend my hard earned cash on. If I'm growing unhappy with a regular title I want to see what lies ahead and whether it's going to be worth $20 for another six months of treading water. You see, we come from an industry that used teasers to promote itself in a time when there was no organised promotion of their goods and that is an ingrained, almost genetic trait amongst comics fans, they want to be titillated by what to expect next – the logical extension of the *Next Issue* box and it all becomes paradoxical.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Sarah Michelle Gellar); the latest in a growing line of TV shows where the need to know what happens in future episodes is like a new addictive drug?

The spoiler warning is an annoying but workable solution and a necessary netiquette, so surely it should be adopted by everything? Would a popular entertainment website [insert name here] lose any hits if it had the headline "Major spoilers inside" rather than something like "Buffy and Willow in naked lesbian hard-core episode"? I agree it's something that will get even most cold blooded of fans hot, but imagine just turning on and watching it … with your parents… OK, so that's not the best example, but I think you get my meaning. Having a care about fellow fans is what made comics such a friendly hobby, surely that isn't too much to ask now?

WRETCH FOR THE STARS

HESTER & SLAVE LABOR SITTING IN A TREE

PHIL Hester has become something of a household name in comics these days, after stints as regular artist on Mark Millar's **Swamp Thing** run, and the latest series of **Green Arrow**, where he and inker Ande Parks have been the constant, alongside writers Kevin Smith, Brad Meltzer and the upcoming Judd Winick tenure.

Hester also wrote the acclaimed miniseries **The Coffin**, in collaboration with artist Mike Huddleston for Oni Press, which has recently been optioned for development as a movie. His raised profile in the industry has made it financially viable to bring back into print the complete adventures (so far) of Hester's breakthrough original creation: **The Wretch**, in three volumes. Originally appearing under the name *The Creep* in Caliber Press' **Negative Burn** anthology, the character proved enough of a hit to spin out into his own series. Unfortunately, while the book received great critical acclaim, sales were low, and in a bitter irony, the book was cancelled with issue 4, in the month that it received an Eisner nomination for Best New Series… In a testimonial, Brian Bendis (**Powers**, **Daredevil**, **Ultimate Spider-Man**) called **The Wretch** "one of the very finest independent comics of the last decade, and one of my favorites."

In 1997, **The Wretch** moved publishers to Slave Labor Graphics, as part of their all-ages imprint Amaze Ink, where it notched up six more issues. Again, low sales called a halt to the series, though this time it was Hester's decision, due to the pressing need to find more financially rewarding work, with two new babies at home. Since then, The Wretch has made a few appearances here and there in anthology titles, all due for reprinting in the collected editions.

The Wretch himself is something of an enigma – a shadow given form; he has never spoken in any of his published adventures, nor does anyone know where he comes from, or where he goes to between stories. It may be that he's an alien, or some kind of supernatural creature, but even Hester seems unsure of his origins, or at least unwilling to spill the beans. Which is as it should be. All that is known is that wherever in the American Midwestern town of Glass City weirdness rises up to strike out against the innocent, you can be sure that The Wretch will be there to stop it. And Glass City has more than its share of weird… An archetype of the isolated little towns that Hester grew up in, Glass City is a magnet for black magicians, alien invaders, evil Magic 8 Balls, possessed dogs, revenants and killer clowns, and of course, its unofficial protector – The Wretch. Although the subject matter is dark, Hester manages to tread lightly, and with lashings of surreal humour. **The Wretch** embodies Hester's love of the short story form, and affords him the freedom to be more experimental than he can be in his more mainstream work. It's a testament to Hester's ability that the titular character displays so much personality without the crutch of conversation or backstory to inform the reader.

The first collection, due out in April, is entitled **Everyday Doomsday** (ISBN 0-943151-68-6, $13.95), and contains all of the material from the six issues comprising the Amaze Ink run of the series. In June, **Devil's Lullaby** is published, collecting all the Caliber Press material. Then, in August, Amaze Ink will release the final volume, **From Cradle to Grave**, which will be a little different to the preceding books, in a more traditional 64 page comic book format, pulling together all the disparate Wretch short stories that have appeared in anthologies across a raft of different publishers.

Publisher Dan Vado spoke to **Borderline** about the upcoming

collections, commenting: "Phil Hester's **The Wretch** is the kind of series which should have a huge appeal. It's just this side of creepy, yet manages to maintain a friendly feel. I think Phil is one of a handful of creators who can reach out and touch their readers.

"**The Wretch**, for the longest time, was one of those things which people would always ask me about. When is there going to be a new issue; what is Phil Hester doing these days? **The Wretch** trade paperbacks are going to take their place alongside our other titles which we will always keep in print."

Phil Hester graciously took time out from his schedule to chat with Borderline**'s Jay Eales about his most famous creation:**

Borderline: *What was the initial impetus for creating the character in the first place?*
Phil Hester: I was getting plenty of work from mainstream comics, but I wasn't writing anything but short stories at that time, and I really needed to sort of stretch my storytelling muscles and explore some aspects of comics that the mainstream work wasn't amenable to. **The Wretch**, being mute and very gestural, is a perfect vehicle for experimental storytelling. Plus, the whole concept is so amorphous that I can tell pretty much any kind of story and still stay inside the parameters of what's considered a typical Wretch story.

BL: *I'd never really thought of the book as being for all-ages until I read Amaze Ink's solicitation copy, but of course it is very accessible to younger readers, as well as older ones, without patronising either audience. Was that a deliberate decision, or just a happy coincidence?*
PH: I write everything for the 12-year-old me, so happy coincidence is probably the answer. I didn't set out to exclude any topics or images from the book, just told the stories that came naturally. There's no real sexual content or gore in the book, but some of the concepts are pretty disturbing.

BL: *You changed the name from The Creep to The Wretch after discovering that John Arcudi was already using the name. Refresh my memory, if you will - Is that when the character design switched from the armoured look to the bandages as well?*
PH: No. The costume change came out of a critique from Alex Toth. He correctly pointed out that the armor/hose costume was detrimental to the gestures and compositions I was after. He's smart. Arcudi and Dark Horse were nothing but gracious in their request for the name change. The Wretch is better, anyway.

BL: *Have you done any new material for the Amaze Ink collections? New cover art, for example, or unpublished material?*
PH: All three volumes will have new cover art and feature unpublished sketches, layouts, etc., and volume 3 will have a new story called *Baby Came Back*, which is creepy as hell. Shocker.

BL: *The third book contains 64 pages from various Wretch appearances in anthologies. Could you give me a few more details about this material?*
PH: It's stuff that appeared in books that I'm proud to be a part of, but maybe didn't get seen by too many people. It contains shorts from **Negative Burn**, **Novo Volo**, **Action Planet**, and the **Shocktrauma Comics Annual**, plus the new story.

BL: *After these three books are published, is that it for* ***The Wretch****? Or do you think you'll be returning to Glass City somewhere down the line?*
PH: Someday. People keep asking me about it and I do have about 10-12 good Wretch stories plotted out and ready to fly. I guess I just need to find the time to do them.

BL: *What's on your current workslate (remembering the arm's-length list you gave me when we were doing the Oni overview!)?*
PH: Writing **Firebreather** with Andy Kuhn for Image, **Deep Sleeper** with Mike Huddleston for Oni. Drawing **Green Arrow** with Judd Winick for DC, and, when I can find the time, noodling away on a secret project with Warren Ellis for Oni.

The Wretch - Volume One: Everyday Doomsday *(ISBN 0-943151-68-6, $13.95) will be published by Slave Labor Graphics/Amaze Ink in April 2003.*

TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

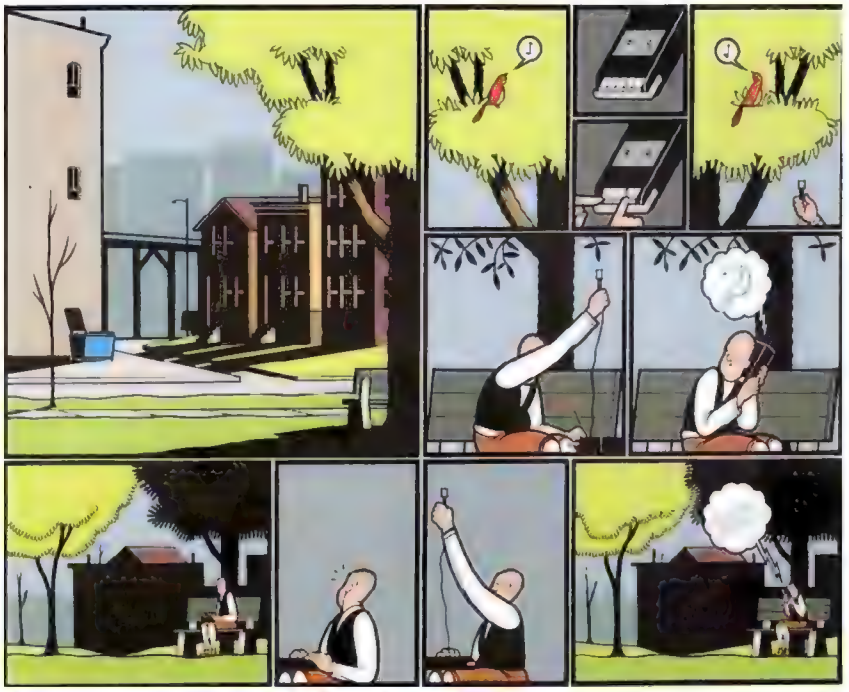
Our North American correspondent, Arnold T. Blumberg, continues his look at comics and the education system...

IN part three of this look at the creation of my comic book literature course, we're going to wrap up the reading list. As I explained last time, I had the unique opportunity four years ago to create a course in "comics as literature" from scratch, and several choices for relevant texts immediately suggested themselves - indeed, they had always been in the back of my mind as ideal sources for just such a course.

In the previous column, I covered my selection of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as the introductory textbook for the course to establish a common frame of reference and shared vocabulary between my students and myself. As for the readings themselves, *Maus* was my first and most obvious choice given its Pulitzer prize-winning pedigree and depth of material, followed by Rick Geary's *Fatal Bullet* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. But what else could I add to this eclectic mix of fictional "funnies?"

Often referred to as "the comic to introduce your girlfriend to comics," the 'soap opera' saga *Strangers in Paradise* - with its long story arcs and film noir overtones - was another natural choice. I believed - correctly - that this particular series, focusing as it does on two close female friends and the emotional and situational dilemmas that complicate their lives, might engage female students more readily than standard superhero fare. To represent the still running series, I chose the seminal arc titled "I Dream of You," available in graphic novel form. Creator Terry Moore's complex characterization is matched by his intriguing use of visual and verbal contrast to juxtapose the light-hearted world of Francine with that of her troubled friend, Katchoo.

Before we conclude with the last two "books" in the course, I should note that these are not the only comics read during the semester. In order to fill the gaps as it were and touch on other genres, other methods of mixing words and pictures to serve a narrative, I had to supplement the core readings with a number of individual comic book tales drawn from 60 years of storytelling. Units were devoted to: the birth of American comics in the so-called "Golden Age" - with attention to the primitive early escapades of the pre-war Superman and Batman; the rise of horror genre



Chris Ware's **Jimmy Corrigan** a perfect example of a graphic novel as educational tool.

king EC and its plethora of graphic design and narrative innovations; *Classics Illustrated* and how comics adapt and perhaps distort prose to suit the medium, introducing a satisfying irony in which students were now required to read comics notorious as "cheat sheets" for grade school book reports; a look at the common comedic vocabulary of early humor comics like *Archie* and *Little Lulu*; and an examination of 'slice-of-life' storytelling via Adrian Tomine's *Optic Nerve* anthology series.

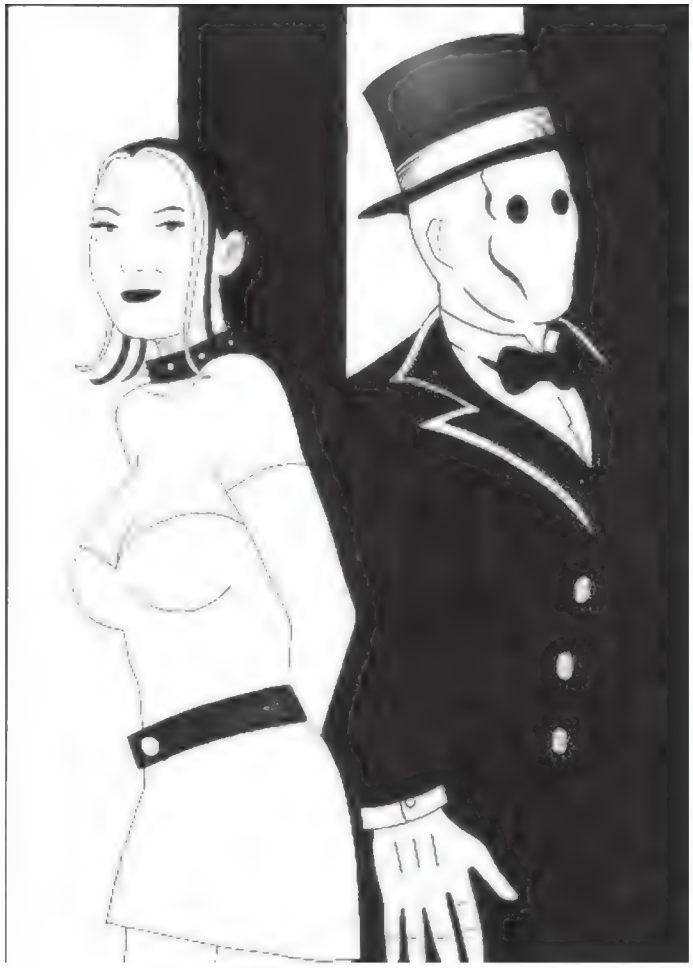
Many of these individual readings changed over the years as the course developed, but the core selections remain the same even now. To conclude the course, I currently use Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* and Judd Winick's *Pedro and Me*. The former - a huge and complex narrative culled from the serialized tales featured in Ware's *Acme Novelty Library* - is a masterpiece of non-linear storytelling. Ware's keen appreciation for architectural design informs everything from his backgrounds to his page compositions, and the story itself is a soul-searching ode to alienation that often leaves students uncomfortable but searching for meaningful insight into Ware's work. The latter, another Pulitzer contender in a distinctive cartoonish style, details the real-life friendship between author Winick and the late AIDS activist (and fellow *MTV Real World* co-star) Pedro Zamora. The incongruous blend of simplistic art and weighty subject matter enables the class to delve into some very heavy emotional issues that frequently strike close to home.

And that about covers it. While the course does veer repeatedly into superhero territory for brief units that track the development of America's dominant comic book genre, the rest of the reading list offers a wide-ranging blend of genres that hopefully gives newcomers an idea of just what the medium can accomplish. Naturally, there are many equally important examples of comic book literature that have been omitted for reasons of time. I am sometimes asked why I don't include Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, or perhaps a selection from Neil Gaiman's superb *Sandman* series; many students also inquire about manga or comics from other cultures. My answer is always the same – one semester is clearly not enough to cover everything, and sacrifices have to be made in order to keep the course moving along. Ultimately, I chose readings that represent certain basic themes and narrative methods. Others may choose completely different comics…but then they're not teaching this particular class.

Next time, I'll wrap up this look at my comic book course and offer some insight into how students react to the experience. Have I won over any new comic book fans? Perhaps…you only have to wait a month to find out!

WHEN SMALL (PRESS) MINDS MEET

Remember a few months ago, when Borderline made a fuss about the British small press comic ***The O Men*** *? That series' creator Martin Eden has now melded in a chimerical wedding with Grant Springford, the resultant creature being a formless expression of abstract ideas that unusually still speaks with the two men's voices. Kelvin Green dared to go near…*



BORDERLINE: **What are you up to, then?**
Martin: One of the first projects we're looking at is an anthology title - *Ominous Tales*. Our idea is to produce a collection of short stories with a horror/sci-fi twist. The title will be made up of illustrated prose and comic strips.

We have plenty of stories we want to tell and we've already got some other writers lined up. We're still on the lookout for other talent though, so if you've got a story in mind, or if you're an artist looking for an outlet to showcase your work, drop Grant a line (*grantspringford@yahoo.co.uk*).

(About Martin
I've been drawing since I was about 3 months old, and in my mid-teens I messed around with comics called The Space Scouts, The Star Lords and The Wonder Men (oh dear). I got involved in the small press when I was 21, contributing to the *Bulldog Magazine*, a Charles Bukowski publication and a sci-fi comic called *Contact*. I started writing and *drawing The O Men*, a super hero soap opera, 4 years ago, and it's still going. It's been nominated for an Eagle Award for two years running.)

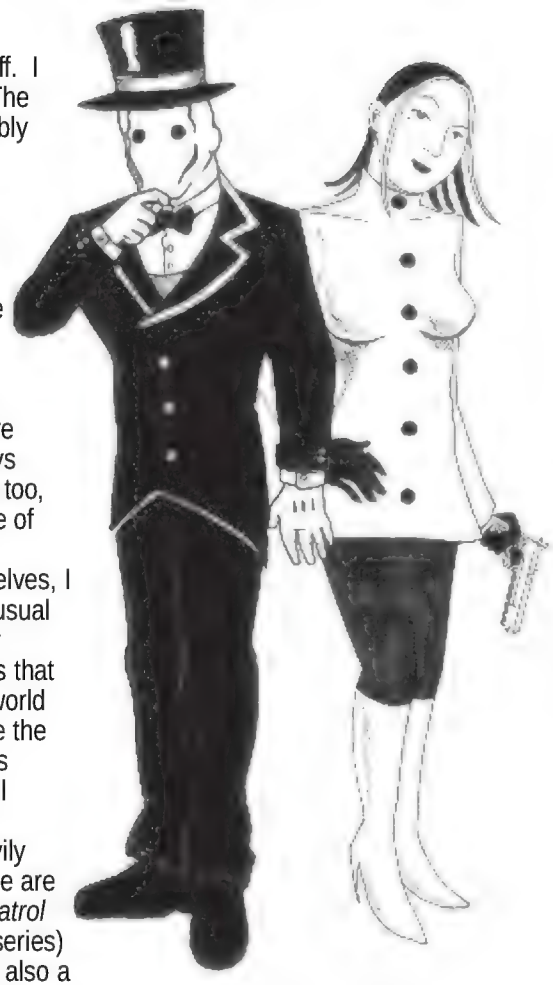
BL: Grant, for readers new to Pest Control, please tell us a bit about yourself and your comic.
Grant: I first became involved in the small-press scene when I pencilled Lord Thunder for a title called *Mondo*. I got a lot of great feedback for that which gave me the encouragement I needed to go it alone and produce my own stuff. I started off with a title I called 'The Abnormals', which did reasonably well but unfortunately not well enough to continue with it! I'm relieved to say *Pest Control*'s been a lot more successful!

Pest Control's very much a super-team book, although I like to think it goes a bit beyond the norm. It was always my idea to produce something surreal and disturbing. The kind of title where anything can happen. I've always been a bit of a sucker for soaps too, so there's more than a fair share of soap stuff going on.

As for the characters themselves, I think they veer away from the usual stereotypical super-types. *Pest Control*'s all about the madness that would go hand in hand with a world where paranormal incidents are the norm, and I think my characters reflect that. Basically, they're all pretty instable!

It's a comic that's been heavily influenced by pop culture. There are no two ways about it - *Doom Patrol* (Grant Morrison's DC Comics series) was a huge inspiration. But I'm also a big fan of British cult TV so you'll see elements of that in my work. Music too. For example, Kate Bush's early albums pretty much brought the Penny Dreadful character to life. And without giving too much away, the Beatles' more psychedelic stuff contains some important clues about *Pest Control*…

I was born and bred in the backstreets of the EasE end, raised on a staple diet of music and Marvel comics! Actually, one of my earliest memories is sitting with my dad while he read some kiddie comic or other to me. I seem to remember a Jack Russell terrier in clothes called Toby on the cover. I think that must have made a big impression on me (reading the comic, not dressing dogs up in dungarees) because I was hooked on comics from then on. My parents are great - they were forever encouraging me and my sister to be creative so I think I pretty much knew I wanted to work in the comics field very early on.



I also had a great teacher - Mrs Frankland. I wonder whatever happened to Mrs Frankland?! I ended up being the only kid who took art and design A-level so she and I had the class to ourselves. It was great - she'd let me focus on comic related ideas 'cos she knew that's where my interests lay. So we used to spend all

these afternoons looking at comic styles and mixing them with more traditional stuff. She had a thing for Chester Gould's artwork and we'd compare his panels with, say, Van Gogh's work and end up creating these heavily textured cartoons! Hey - that must be where my 'texture style' comes from!

So I left college with great artistic ambition and became...a Civil Servant! Which isn't all bad - I've had some pretty interesting jobs. I was David Blunkett's correspondence and Cabinet Document manager while he was Education Secretary. He's very inspirational. I mean, here's a guy from a working class background, blind all his life and yet worked his way up to Home Secretary - I think that's an example to us all.

Anyway, despite being a full time Government Department website manager I have a healthy balance of creativity through *Pest Control*! I'm in a good mood at the moment - I'm about to achieve a lifelong ambition and become a published artist. Yay! It's a bit of a happy accident really - I was chatting with one of our consultants and she happened to see a copy of the comic on my mate's desk and it turned out she needed her book illustrated! See folks - *Pest*

Control comes hand in hand with good fortune! Reason alone to buy it, eh?!

BL: So, why start a publishing house? What are the advantages of joining forces in the world of small press comics?
Martin: It's **Borderline**'s fault. When they reviewed *Pest Control* 2, they talked about there being an exciting new school starting up in the small press, and we just thought, well maybe there is. The thing with me and Grant is that we grew up with the same comics, mid-80s Marvel stuff - we know what we like, and we're pretty much on the same wavelength. I think *Pest Control* and *The O Men* have similar vibes.

I think the advantages are that we can cross-promote, and can kill two birds with one stone in promotions. And I also think that by starting up a 'company', we're saying to the reader that we're serious about what we're doing. Some small press comics come and go, but we are going to stick with it (until we, er, sell out, of course).

Grant: I think *Ominous Comics* will give us more presence on the market. Martin and I are playing around with a lot of ideas at the moment - it's our aim to bring what's often a neglected area a little closer to the surface of the comic industry.

For me it's also great to have support from a fellow creator. Someone to bounce ideas around with.

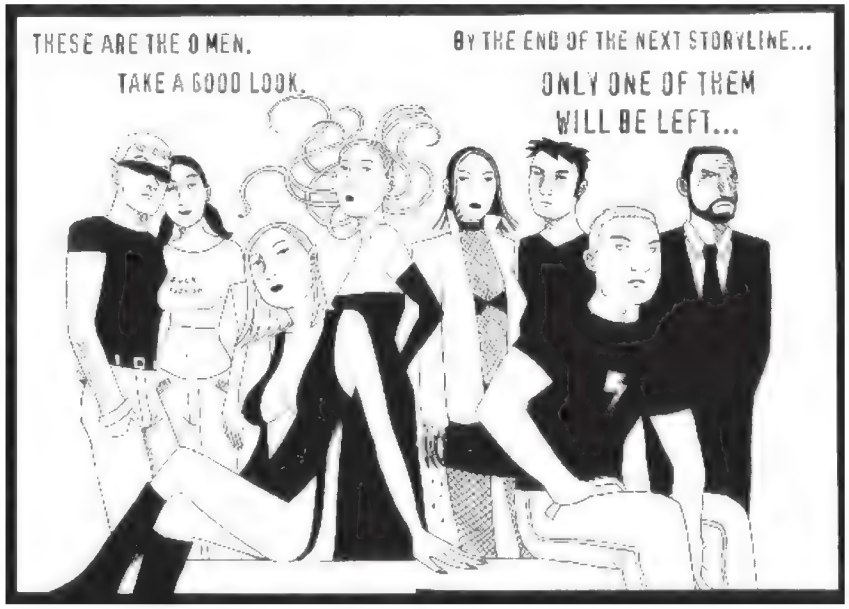
BL: Why go it alone, when other small press publishing houses exist?
Grant: Primarily because our titles have a similar feel to each other. They're both pretty dark and character driven. It'd be nice to think that readers would see the Ominous logo and immediately know what kind of title they can expect.
Martin: Yeah, Make Mine Ominous!

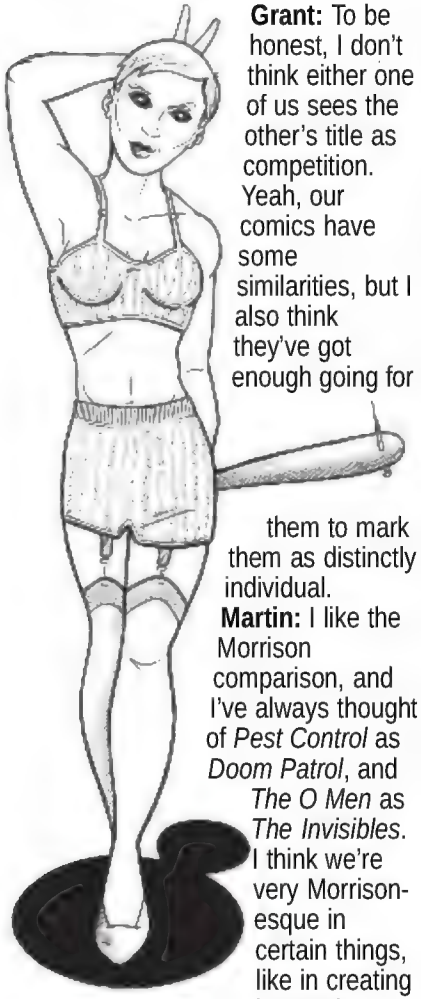
BL: On what scale is this project? Is this just to publish/market your two titles, or could you see expansion in terms of other titles or even other creators?
Grant: Well, yeah, of course it's a great way for us to market our respective titles. But we'd certainly like to see Ominous expanding. We're already considering another project and that would involve other talents. In fact, one of the original ideas behind making Ominous a publishing house was to encourage and support other creators.
Martin: The fun thing about it is that we're making it up as we go along. We do have some cunning plans, but I can't say what they are just yet - it's a bit early.

We are well up for other creators joining the Ominous Comics banner, although their work needs to have a similar kind of feel to them as *PC* and *The O Men*. I think they must also be aware that they have to pay their own way in all this! We've already got one guy interested in writing an Ominous Comic - he wrote a story in *2000AD* a while back. He doesn't know what he wants to do yet, though. And we need an artist for him, so any budding artists out there, please get in touch! I'd be interested in anyone having a stab at an *O Men* spin-off comic, maybe a flashback to the UK Ultra Knights. Or we could do an anthology series called *Ominous Comics*. The sky's the limit, really.

BL: The O Men is a fixture in the British small press now, with a good reputation and strong sales, whereas Pest Control is just getting started. So is Martin the driving/dominant force here? Is this solely a case of the newer title taking advantage of the popularity of the other? What do Martin and The O Men gain?
Martin: I think you overestimate how good my sales are! But I think any extra publicity I get from all this can only be beneficial - even if I only get one new regular reader out of it.

BL: Both titles have a strong Grant Morrison flavour, and both titles have broadly similar premises, so why associate them in this way? Is there not a danger that you are in some way bringing attention to the competition?





Grant: To be honest, I don't think either one of us sees the other's title as competition. Yeah, our comics have some similarities, but I also think they've got enough going for them to mark them as distinctly individual.

Martin: I like the Morrison comparison, and I've always thought of *Pest Control* as *Doom Patrol*, and *The O Men* as *The Invisibles*. I think we're very Morrison-esque in certain things, like in creating interesting characters and off-the-wall stories.

BL: From the previous interview Borderline did with Martin, we know that hiswriting style involves putting together each issue, jigsaw-like, from amass of notes and ideas he's collected over the years. Grant, how doesyour style compare?

Grant: Pretty much the same. Most of the cast of *Pest Control* are characters I've had sitting around in sketch pads that have built up over the past fifteen years or more. The Link, for example, was adapted from a character called The Medium and I created him just over a decade ago while I was still at college! And then there are others who never even got to the design stage - just names scribbled onto a page that I'll come across and get inspired by - that's pretty much how Black Death (who debuts in issue 3) was born.

It's the same with plots and ideas - I have more note-pads than you can shake a stick at piled on a bookcase at home. So I'll flick through those and a story will jump out and beg to get written. So yeah, *Pest Control*'s pretty much a patchwork of ideas that have been patiently waiting to get used. I know how *Pest Control* will end and it's quite nice to revisit those old ideas along the way.

BL: What about your art styles?

Grant: It's strange because my artwork's pretty schizophrenic! Each issue seems to be made up of a mix of styles that I find myself doing subconsciously. I'll be drawing a few pages inked with heavy blocks of black and white and then suddenly find myself focussing on texture. Speaking of which - a few people have told me that they find my 'textured' stuff a bit unsettling and I took that as a compliment! I ***want*** people to feel uneasy about *Pest Control* and I guess it's working!

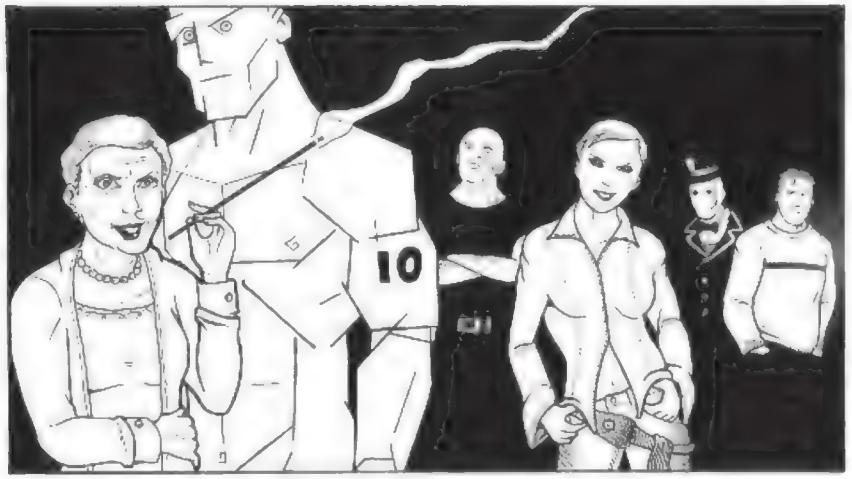
BL: So, what's in store for the two titles in the future? Readers of Borderline #6 will have a broad idea of where Martin's taking his comic, but Pest Control is very new, so what can we expect there?

Grant: Things are going to get much more bizarre! I'm going to be focusing a lot more on the actual world *Pest Control* lives in. The title's set in England and I want that to be a lot more evident. We're going to see exactly what effect the world-gone mad has had on the country as much as the people who live there.

In 2003 we're also going to be learning a lot more about the individual characters that make up the team - particularly Penny Dreadful. The three part 'Corridors of Pain' story-arc will pretty much reveal what she's all about. I'm really enthusiastic about this story. We'll also be seeing a lot more of The Link. He seems to be the readers' favourite, despite the fact that he hasn't really done much yet!

There's also going to be a lot of focus on the non-members of the team. The spotlight's going to fall on Andy in particular. Readers can also expect some clues about exactly who *Pest Control* works for. I hid the first clue in issue 2. I've had a few letters from readers who assumed it's the government, but the truth's a lot more wild!

Martin: As for *O Men*, I'm launching into the 10-part finale to volume 1. It's an absolute monster - an old enemy starts picking the team off one by one. The shocks and revelations are going to keep on coming, and at least 3 main characters will be dead by the halfway stage. I'll be doing some fun things too - there'll be an entire issue revolving around 2 enemies having dinner together, an issue focusing on the O Men's American counterparts, the USAviors, and loads more cool stuff - it's going to be great.



BL: On a related note, are there any crossovers planned now you're stablemates?

Martin: Nothing planned so far. It might be fun to do something somewhere down the line (if any of my characters are alive after the next storyline). That's the fun thing about creating your own characters - you can do what the hell you want with them. If I want to wipe out half my team in the next issue then I will. I think the worst word in creative media at the moment is 'franchise'. Once things like *Buffy* and the *X-Men* and *Star Trek* become franchises, then the writers can't do drastic things to the characters cos they'll affect the toy lines or whatever. I hear *Angel*'s Charisma Carpenter got in trouble with her bosses for chopping her hair off - it affects her pictures on the video covers and it affects her action figures, I guess. I mean, how stupid is that? Who cares?

Grant: I don't think there'll be any crossovers - *O Men* and *Pest Control* take place in separate realities. Cool idea though! It would have been pretty cool to have had June Moon or Patchwork Annie serving drinks behind the bar in *PC*3!

BL: Being perfectly honest, what do you think of each others' titles?

Grant: I'm a huge fan of *The O Men* - I've been reading it since it began and I'm still just as hooked now. In a lot of ways it was what inspired me to start self-publishing. In my eyes it made a big impact on the small press scene and I don't think anything's come close since.

Martin: Cheers, mate, I'll pay you later. Actually, the reason me and Grant became friends in the first place is that he sent me some *O Men* 'fan art'!

I think *Pest Control* is a very exciting comic. Penny Dreadful, The Link and Miriam are fantastic characters, and it's great fun seeing what they're going to get up to next. Grant's enthusiasm is infectious, and he's always talking about his latest ideas. I personally can't wait to see

his character Black Death. He's been going on about her for ages!

The *PC* art's great too, and it is getting better all the time. Grant puts an amazing amount of detail into each page. I think he spent 4 weekends in a row totally focusing on *Pest Control*, and I said 'oh, so have you nearly finished then?' and I think he'd only done about 3 pages.

BL: What about other small press titles? What's worth reading out there?

Martin: I'm afraid I have no idea. I get sent comics and I just never get round to reading them which is amazingly rude, I know. I've got such a backlog of stuff to read as it is - the entire *Finder* series, a *Queen and Country* trade paperback, *Doom Patrol* archives, and so on. I really should read the small press stuff I'm sent - it wasn't so long ago that I sent about 60 *O Men* 1 freebies out and only got about 4 replies, which was really disheartening.

BL: At the end of the day, is small press publication worth the hassle? Why?

Grant: I think so. Yeah, it can be frustrating at times and, with a full time job, very time-consuming. But it's all worthwhile when you get a good review! Actually, getting letters from people who've enjoyed my work is what does it for me. A few weeks back I got an email from a shop that's selling *PC* and they called it 'phenomenal'! I think I'm still buzzing from that!

I think the other factor to consider is that you've got the kind of freedom that'd be restricted if you were working for a mainstream company. I can pretty much do whatever I want with *Pest Control*.

Martin: It is absolutely worth the hassle, and I recommend it to anyone. I mean, there's not much money to be made out of it, but you get different kinds of rewards. I got an email just the other week from someone who picked up *O Men* 15 and thoroughly enjoyed it - the thought that he was able to enjoy the comic so far into the series is fantastic, and the fact that he sat down to write a long letter about it is amazing. And I've been getting off my backside recently and selling some *O Men* packs in Gosh Comics. They sold out in 3 days!! Forget *X-Men* 1 selling a million, selling 5 packs in 3 days is amazing to me.

BL: Computer awareness and the power of the internet have both grown immensely over the past few years, meaning that now anyone who wants to can do an online comic strip. With this cheap alternative to printing now available, do you think the traditional small press is in any danger?

Grant: I don't think so. It's great to have this all new alternative and I'm sure it's a medium that will get ever more popular. But, at the end of the day, I don't think good old fashioned 'paper' comics will ever go out of fashion! Hmm, do I sound like a luddite, or what?!

Martin: Nah, I don't think so either. While online stuff does have certain cool benefits, I seriously can't see comics, newspapers, magazines or books dying out - not for a long, long time. I'm a magazine editor by day, so obviously this has crossed my mind, but at the end of the day, I just can't see them going anywhere. How are you going to read online stuff on the beach, or in the bathroom, or on a train? And computers do your eyes in after a couple of hours. And while you can read news and interviews on the web, there's just something - I dunno - final or official about reading it in a physical publication.

BL: Anything you'd like to say before you go?

Grant: Yes - please buy *Pest Control* or else I'll send The Link round to your house at the dead of night. Seriously, though, I just wanted to say thanks to everyone who's taken a chance on the title.

Martin: If anyone wants to get in touch, they can do so through the website - *www.theomen.free-online.co.uk*. Cheers!

RETURN TO SENDER

After years of working under a direct sale system in which comics stores must buy all titles and then hope to sell them – with no guarantee of doing so – retailers are at last being offered an alternative to the Direct Market.

A selection of titles from DC Comics are to be offered on a sale-or-return basis, starting in February. **Borderline***'s Mike Sivier looks this gift horse in the mouth to see if it has any bite.*

THE direct market, as practiced in local comics shops across Britain and North America, has one serious drawback: It is the shops that take all the commercial risks. The shops base their orders on the information provided by publishers. They then buy *outright* the number of copies they think they can sell – and the money they spend keeps the major distributors – such as Diamond - and the publisher in profit.

But then the shops have to actually sell those comics. If they haven't got their numbers right, they run a twofold risk: Under-ordering means they could sell out of a particular title, leaving some customers unsatisfied and themselves without the benefit of the extra sales; and over-ordering means the shop will be left with multiple unsolds and a sales deficit. Unlike the record industry, which operates on a similar fashion, there is no risk taken by anyone other than the retailer.

For years, retailer representatives have pleaded with the major publishers to bring in some form of protection against retailers taking blind risks. Until now the pleas have fallen on deaf or unsympathetic ears. Enter DC Comics, with its new *Share the Risk* programme of limited returnability for retailers serviced by Diamond's US division. Retailers serviced through Diamond UK will be added to the program in the near future.

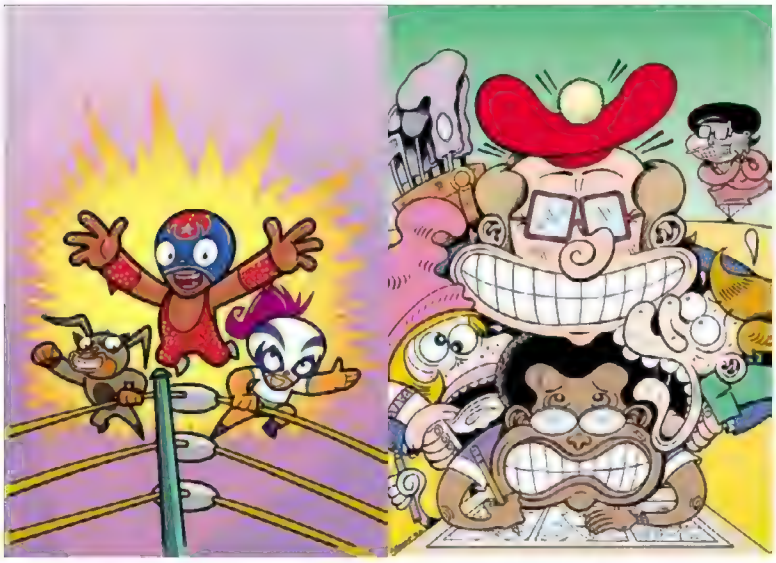
Under the new scheme, when retailers order issues of particular comics in quantities at or above their earned discount tiers' minimum quantities, they will be eligible to return up to 20 per cent of their initial orders. It doesn't sound much, but it is headway.

The first titles offered under the scheme are **Green Arrow** #23, **Beware the Creeper** #1, **Mucha Lucha** #1, and **Sweatshop #1** - and here's where alarm bells could be ringing in retailers' heads.

Green Arrow despite being a proven seller has a core audience – what guarantee will the retailer have if he ups his orders that new readers will *want* to buy it. Also, the others are all first issues, therefore orders would be higher any way. Retailers have to gamble that they will achieve enough popularity to justify ordering them at the levels required to be eligible for *Share the Risk* – and even then they will be able to return only a fifth of their order. It could be a worse of two evils scenario.

The first titles released under the scheme will be announced as returnable at a later date in **Diamond Dateline**, [Diamond's retailer newsletter] and will be eligible for returns for a limited time only. Retailers will be billed for the titles in the normal way and then credited for the returns at a later date. So they could be waiting a considerable time for their cash.

That's the downside. But the programme is the first attempt by any of the major publishers to help comics shop owners with their perennial dilemma, and it comes from a saturation test conducted by DC with a group of shops in the States.



Bob Wayne, DC's VP - Sales and Marketing, talks it up: "*Share the Risk* begins a new era of publisher/retailer relations, and it's our hope that the ultimate result of a limited returnability program will be to take advantage of missed sales opportunities, both for retailers and DC.

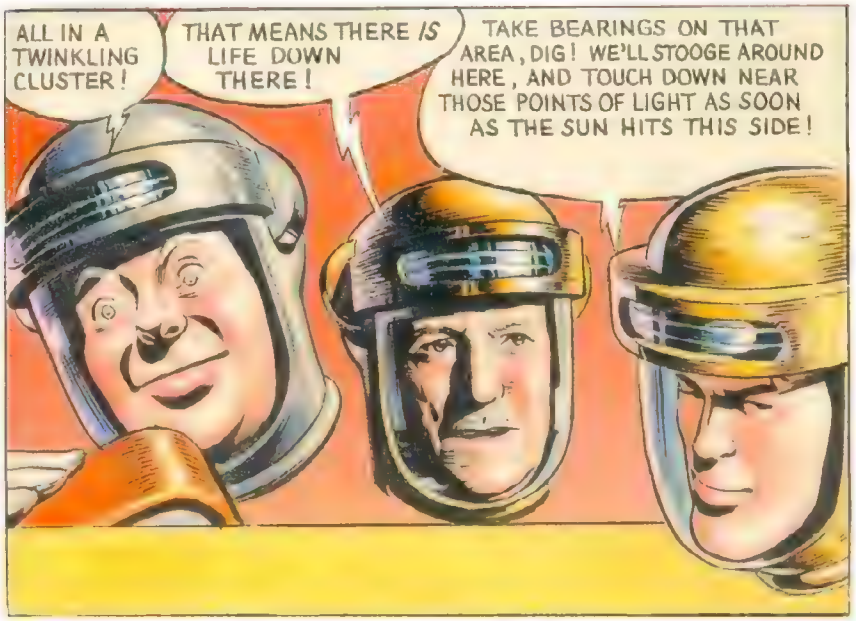
"We extend our thanks to the retailers who participated in the saturation test," he said, adding: "We owe a special thanks to Brian Hibbs of Comix Experience of San Francisco, CA, who worked closely with us from the very beginning to develop this program."

Hibbs is similarly upbeat: "It took a long time to make this happen, but I think the rewards we stand to reap will make the effort more than worthwhile.

"This program could be the beginning of a shift potentially as significant as the day Phil Seuling convinced publishers that direct market comics retailers represented a market to be pursued. Clearly, the results of the initial saturation test show that a lot more comics can be sold than any of us thought."

IN SEARCH OF FRANK BELLAMY

This month David McLintock caused us some pretty feverish searching for illustrations...


ALL IN A TWINKLING CLUSTER!
THAT MEANS THERE *IS* LIFE DOWN THERE!
TAKE BEARINGS ON THAT AREA, DIG! WE'LL STOOGE AROUND HERE, AND TOUCH DOWN NEAR THOSE POINTS OF LIGHT AS SOON AS THE SUN HITS THIS SIDE!

IT'S back to dear old Blighty again, this time to track down info on the man who still remains my all time favourite British artist. Oh how I looked forward every day to my "Garth" fix, which I religiously read every day, just after checking out "Newsboy's" racing tips in the *Daily Mirror*. Golden days indeed, and all that Lester Piggott knew at that time of the taxman was that it was a rather good track by The Beatles. Ah, innocent times. Through time the women in Garth began to display more than their personalities (nudge, nudge), the stories grew more elaborate, but Lester stayed an obstinate 5 foot 7, which is admittedly humungous for a jockey, and why he was nicknamed "The Longfellow". As usual an old man digresses...

Via the magic of search engines, first up is "Frank Bellamy the Artist" at *www.members.aol.com/bellamyart/bellamy.htm*. In a small biog we discover Bellamy being born in Kettering in 1917. There's nothing more until his war service in 1939, fighting the Bosche square on by painting aircraft recognition pictures. There's little detail of his career at *Swift*, then *The Eagle*, but there are some nice samples of his lovely artwork on The Happy Warrior (a series on Winston Churchill which one assumes glossed over Winnie's "black dog" of depression), The Shepherd King, Heros the Spartan, Fraser of Africa, and of course Dan Dare. The site touches on the fact that Frank was not universally a fan favourite on the space hero's art chores, replacing Frank Hampson midway through a story. Being tasked with revamping Dare's design later further alienated the Hampson diehards. All that was before this boy's time, hence I've always preferred Bellamy to Hampson, but I suppose you could equate it to Romita replacing Ditko on *Spider-Man* (yay! A Ditko reference...bet you didn't expect that). It appears Bellamy didn't get on too well with Hampson's team artists, Keith Watson and Don Harley, not being a team player, and FB was relieved to be moved to Fraser of Africa. Ah, the days of empire, when the map was pink and the sun never set blah, blah, (an old duffer remembers). Bellamy himself had a lifelong fascination for the Dark Continent, and had a large collection of African memorabilia, although he never set foot on African soil it says here, though more of that later.

The Dare controversy is elaborated a wee bit at *www.members.aol.com/nicholashl/bellamy.htm* which states that Bellamy took over at a difficult time, what with a new editor, a new publisher, a printers strike (I'm positively wallowing in nostalgia now), and the "very first frame he drew had an almost unrecognisable Dan – the face was redrawn by Don Harley and pasted over the top of Bellamy's!" A fine welcome methinks. Doubtless those of you out there who are Dare fanatics know much more of this saga, so I'll move on to a very nice page of Doctor Who artwork, from the "Terror of the Zygons" at *www.cuttingsarchive.org.uk/radiotim/s12_18/season13/bellamy.htm* which probably took Bellamy less time to complete than it took me to type in that web address.

There's more biographical

THERE ARE RUMOURS OF STRANGE HAPPENINGS ON *CRYPTOS*.
NO RADIO REPORTS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED FROM THE INVASION FORCE SINCE THE LAST SETTING OF THE 'SUN OF LOS'.
IT IS SAID THAT THE MIGHTY AND MYSTIC ORAK HAS ORDERED THE UTTER DESTRUCTION OF *CRYPTOS* WITH HYDRA-MISSILES.
ATTENTION, YOU CHATTERING FOOLS! A SHIP APPROACHES ON RED BEAM FROM *CRYPTOS*!

content at the Comic Art and Graffix Gallery on *www.comic-art.com/bios-2/bellamy.htm* which sees Bellamy start illustrating strip cartoons in 1953 drawing for *Mickey Mouse Weekly* and *Swift* (*wasn't he doing that earlier? – Ed*) before joining *Eagle* in 1957. The Book Palace in its biog for Bellamy gives his early influences as the "juvenile comics of his childhood, *Rainbow* and *Chips*, but it was not until he came across some old US Sunday comic sections that he took an interest in adventure strips... especially Hal Foster and Burne Hogarth's *Tarzan*." It recalls a tale of the young Africa

obsessed Bellamy, wandering through the wagons of a travelling circus which had visited his town, reaching through the bars of a lions cage and plucking a few hairs from the poor wee beasts tail. These he kept in a jar for years afterwards. Those wacky English! The biog touches on all of Bellamy's career, from advertising work on Gibbs toothpaste through to *Thunderbirds* and beyond. A link points to an even fuller biography from *Book and Magazine Collector* No. 222. All this at *www.bookpalace.com/acatalog/Home_Frank_Bellamy_Art_85.html*. If you hurry they might still have some original Bellamy artwork left for sale. Mind, it goes fast, but there's still some original Garth strips going at £125. This site does unfortunately have a particularly annoying tendency to suddenly jump you to their home page. Take two valium before entering.

I have to find at least one curio, and what could be more curious than *www.lucov.com/frankbellamy/frank.html*, which is a site set up by the guy who bought Bellamy's house, dedicative plaque and all. He does give us a couple of photos, but seems relatively clueless of the talent of the man who used to live there, but it was nice of him all the same. For plaque completists out there, and you know who you are, check out *www.tameside.gov.uk/tmbc2/hampson.htm* and both see and read about the one dedicated to the man Bellamy replaced on Dare. A chap called Terry Doyle shares with us the original Bellamy art he has bought at *www.croatianmall.com/lupic/dandare/terrydoyle*, which he claims he owns the copyright for. Now that's something I didn't know you possessed when you purchased an original piece of art. There's three pages of Bellamy's Dan Dare to enjoy. But if you really must delve deeper into clan Bellamy, there's plenty of sites lauding the life and work of the OTHER Frank Bellamy, he of the Pledge fame. No, dear, not the furniture polish, the pledge against taking alcohol. Mother McLintock actually still has the copy I signed back in 1963. It was an easy promise to make whilst still in short trousers and living in a "dry" area at the time. Sadly, in the years since I've rather booked my spot in the burny place when I finally peg out....

Many moons ago, in a previous incarnation, I remember reviewing *www.frankbellamy.com* only to find that this baby, which aimed to be the definitive site on Bellamy, was "coming soon". Sadly in the throes of a bitter January, this was still the case, but hey presto! By mid February this has begun to fill up. There's still lots to be done but this does look as if it will fulfil its promise. There's also a lovely interview with Frank's widow, Nancy, who reveals that Frank did indeed set foot in Africa, albeit the sandier north. It certainly made me feel better knowing a lifelong ambition had been realised. Quite why that leads me to mentioning Bellamy's artwork on the classic *Avengers* episode "The Winged Avenger" where our heroine (and world's most staggeringly beautiful woman) Diana Rigg fights off a supervillain, I don't quite know, but I did mention life long ambitions... sigh. One *Avengers* site you could check is *www.dissolute.com/au/avweb/506.html*.

For reasons of public decency I didn't access the charmingly titled "The Trigan Empire – Classic or FUCKING CLASSIC" at an address too boring to type. Or maybe I was worried I'd find someone who writes louder than me. Various artists make reference to Bellamy's influence on them, Chris Achilleos being one at *www.chrisachilleos.co.uk*, and Barry Windsor Smith in an article for *Comic Book Artist* at *www.twomorrows.com/comicbookartist/articles/02bws.html*. And would you believe it I've made it to the end without even once mentioning *Upstairs Downstairs*. That should thoroughly confuse our colonial readers, heh, heh, heh.

12 O'CLOCK LOCK

This month Selina Lock wonders if the price of being a comics fan is just too high...

I WAS always aware that comics are an expensive habit to keep up but last month's visit to the comic shop brought it home to me just *how* expensive it can be, making me wonder if it is a hobby I can continue to justify.

Jay *[Eales, the news guy]* and I normally nip into the local comics shop every couple of weeks to pick up the titles we have on order, and buying this way means that I never really add up how much we're spending on monthly comics. For some reason we didn't manage to make it into the comic shop between Christmas and the start of February so we had just five weeks' comics to collect. I expected it to be quite a lot of money, but when the cash register rang up £106, I think my face must have gone an interesting shade of pale green. Over a hundred pounds! We don't spend that much on any other form of entertainment in a month. We might buy a DVD or two, go to the pictures or have a couple of takeaways but I wouldn't dream of spending that much on DVDs in one month unless I had an unexpected bonus from work!

Obviously, I need to take into account how many comics we were getting for this princely sum, and the answer was 42 titles, which were either comics or comics magazines. So on average that's £2.50 per title… Now, I don't buy any kind of women's, home decorating or entertainment magazines because they tend to cost at least that much, and I think it's too expensive. So how can I justify spending that much on comics?

The simple answer is that I can't. And if *I* can't; a fan who writes for a comics magazine, who publishes her own small press comic and who lives with a die-hard comics fan, then I'm sure there are many, many comic readers out there that will come to the same conclusion sooner or later, and many who already have. It may be a different incident that pushes them over the edge: the writing in their favourite title isn't enthralling them any more; another 25 cents price hike across the board is a price rise too far; they realise they can quite happily live without finding out what happens next in the latest X-Men title, or their circumstances change, and they need to spend that money on extravagances like rent, food and the occasional new pair of knickers.

Comics stores are not to blame! it's the publisher who doesn't look at the long term viability of comics and just goes for the economic jugular. Stores like Amazing Fantasy, Hull, are trying to give a fair deal despite publishers constantly hiking prices.

Now, being a die-hard comics couple, we aren't going to go and cancel our entire standing order, because it's part of our way of life. Like eating habits, it can be very hard to change what you're used to doing. But we will have to sit down and carefully scrutinise exactly what titles we are buying, and why. It makes me feel like I'm at work, where, as a librarian, in the past few years I've had to look very carefully at what journals we buy, because every year they get more expensive, while our budget gets smaller or remains frozen. It's a sad state of affairs when we're almost happy to see a favourite title cancelled, because then we won't have to buy it any more…

Admittedly, our comic shop could also make it a lot easier for us to manage our comics budget if they told us how much we were actually paying for each title. Nowhere in the shop is there any indication of how much in pounds we are paying for a $2.25 or $2.95 comic. Clouding the issue, they have an arcane discount structure dependent on whether you're paying by card or cash, whether the title was in your standing order, or bought off the shelf, and other criteria. To hear them explain it, it sounds like we're making serious savings, and yet, despite trimming our order repeatedly, we seem to be spending more than ever before… I definitely need to find out next time I go in, but it shouldn't be something I have to ask! I don't buy items from any other type of shop if they aren't priced, so why on earth am I putting up with it for comics?

I know why comics are as expensive as they are. I understand that it's cheaper to publish in bulk and that isn't possible these days as the market isn't there. I know the industry is struggling and can't afford to do things to make it easier for readers. There's shipping costs to factor in, making comics cost more in Britain than they do in their native country, but isn't the UK pound supposed to be strong against the dollar at the moment anyway? But standing at the checkout, being asked for £106, I didn't care about any of that. I just stood there wondering why I was handing that money over. The industry needs to change or there will be many more people wondering why as well.

12 O'Clock Lock will return in Die Another Day

THE VERDICT
COMICS REVIEWS

Borderline's policy is that we don't mark a comic out of ten or some other archaic method of rating. A single comic or a series should be judged on a number of things, therefore we encourage our reviewers to make a judgement about a specific issue. This is why **Borderline**'s review column is the best and fairest in comics!

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

David Booth (DRB)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Kevin Hill (KH)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Martin Shipp (MS)

Have you got a book that requires a Verdict? Then send it to **Borderline** (details on page 2.) Have you got a Verdict on a book? Yes? Then **Borderline** wants you! Contact Martin Shipp: *martinshipp@ borderlinemagazine.co.uk* for reviewing guidelines.

Action Comics #800
By Joe Kelly, Pascale Ferry, Duncan Rouleau and various
DC Comics, $3.95

Eight hundred issues, eh? The comic book that gave us Superman and thus the superhero celebrates its birthday with one of those super-sized special issues; it does so with a close facsimile of its original logo on a cover that once again shows the classic Superman **Action Comics #1** car-over-head scene, but with a twist. And that twist sets the scene for the whole book. Joe Kelly - who is one of the best writers of superheroes around today - retells Superman's origin, as you'd expect in an anniversary issue such as this. But this time the emphasis is on things we haven't seen before: Martha and Jonathan Kent's agonising over whether to keep the crash-landed infant, Clark leaving Smallville along the railroad tracks, his time in Europe and his inspiration for becoming both a mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper and the most respected hero in the world. Pascale Ferry and Duncan Rouleau's art carries it all along nicely, with Ferry having the edge - he does great body language while Rouleau errs on the side of exaggeration.

Interspersed with the history is something more interesting; a series of black-and-white first-person vignettes that show Superman's influence on "real" people. These are in places moving and inspirational (though one at least is pretty heavy-handed in the heart-string-pulling department). They're illustrated by a variety of guest artists, with Bill Sienkiewicz and Dave Bullock's work being the prettiest, Jim Lee's being the one most unlike what you'd expect him to do and Dan Jurgens and Klaus Janson's being the one most like what you'd expect them to do. Dan, we know you killed Superman. Now let it go, would you?

This comic apparently marks Superman's sixty-fifth birthday. On this showing, he won't be retiring any time soon.

The Verdict: ***A comic that is to today's readers what Superman #400 was to the 1980's: a celebration and an affirmation of a modern legend.*** **(MSh)**

Avengers #62
By Geoff Johns, Gary Frank and Jonathan Sibal
Marvel Comics, $2.25US/$3.75Can

After a lot of over-the-top nonsense, we are presented with a down to earth character piece which, slightly disjointed as it is, seems to suit both writer Johns and guest artist Gary Frank much better than the incomprehensible gibberish of Johns' first few issues. Character interaction is Johns' strength on this title, with coherent, let alone exciting, plotting being his weakness. The lack of any real plot here, coupled with a good look at some of the less well-known Avengers, makes this a good read. Gary Frank's art is also far less tired and rushed-looking, finally looking like something an artist of his reputation would produce. That the art matches the script is a bonus.

A very good package, all in all, that has convinced me to keep reading this title for a little while longer. My only criticism is that the emotional content of this story is of the cynical, button-pushing Spielbergian kind - it affects you but you know it's there to affect you, not to help the story.

The Verdict: ***Why can't Johns write superheroics as well as he does this character-based stuff?*** **(KG)**

Avengers #63
By Geoff Johns, Alan Davis and Mark Farmer
Marvel Comics, $2.25 US/$3.75 Can

I didn't think Marvel did pointless crossovers anymore, but here's the arse-end of one, emphasis on the "arse". On the plus side, the handy recap page at the beginning tells us all we need to know, mainly the fact that this storyline is far too weak to be stretched across three comics. So we get no actual plot here, but merely an issue devoted entirely to a fight scene between Iron Man and Thor, and some slightly disturbing political ideas from Geoff Johns. Avoid.

The Verdict: ***A perfect example of why Marvel abandoned crossovers.*** **(KG)**

H.E.R.O #1

By Will Pfeifer and Kano
$2.50 DC Comics

You've got to hand it to DC. They insist on coming out with books like this: quirky, off-kilter takes on the superhero, produced by new or "not quite big name yet" talent, full of potential and brimming with new ideas. The downside is that most of these books last no more than a year or two before being cut down by the conservatism of the standard comics reader. Andy Winter of this parish, describing another current contender, recently used a telling phrase: "This Year's **Chase**". **H.E.R.O.** isn't quite able to clear the bar at the height set by that particular Beautiful Loser, but it takes a pretty good run-up.

Will Pfeifer's revamp of the old *Dial H For Hero* concept has a neat twist: the finder of the superpower-granting device is telling his experiences in flashback to a suicide hotline just before, presumably, offing himself. Unfortunately, this set-up may be what causes this book's demise: Pfeifer's take is (according to DC's pre-publicity) to hate using the device, and this seems to preclude things like a supporting cast or growing familiarity with an established character. In short, it may lack the usual essentials for a long run.

Kano (who apparently has only the one name) draws it all up in a shifting style that rolls from Tim Sale-ish to Beto Hernandez-esque to, at times, Jack Davis-like, with special emphasis on the Tim Sale. Give him time to settle down and he'll doubtless develop a style all of his own. For now he's doing some interesting visual tricks, though these may be Pfeifer's work as much as his.

This sounds like the book's getting a lousy review, but it's really not bad at all. The main "hero" goes on about what a loser he is, but as soon as he uses the device he does all the right things; as a character he's rather endearing, stuck as he is in a dead-end job in a closed-down industrial town. As you read it, you hope he's going to be all right, that he'll pull out of his suicidal mood and go on to greater things, all the while feeling that he most probably won't. That you feel this empathy with him says a great deal about Pfeifer's ability as a writer.

The Verdict: ***Worth a look, and better than a lot of the mainstream stuff out there, but unlikely to be around for more than a year or so. Try it before it vanishes.*** **(MSh)**

The Filth #7

By Grant Morrison, Chris Weston and Gary Erskine
DC/Vertigo,
$2.95US/$4.95Can

Well, I still have no idea what's going on in this title. Oddness is heaped upon oddness, and I'm left feeling adrift on a sea of confusion. And yet this remains highly entertaining science fiction. As such, it is similar in many ways to the weirder episodes of *The Prisoner* or *The Avengers* (the Steed and Emma Peel version). So Grant Morrison has me exactly where he wants me: confused, compliant, and open to new ideas. And I'm loving it.

The Verdict: ***This is good, but I'll be buggered if I can say why.*** **(KG)**

The Punisher #21

By Garth Ennis
and Steve Dillon
Marvel Comics, $2.99

It's an issue of **The Punisher**. It's one of the serious ones, where there are no grotesque villains or piss-takes of Marvel heroes and where the violence isn't as gloriously, ludicrously over-the-top. As such, it's not as entertaining. Still, it's your three dollars.

The Verdict: ***Bring back the mayhem and bring it back now!*** **(MSh)**

Transformers: The War Within #4

By Simon Furman, Don Figueroa and Elaine To
Dreamwave Productions, $2.95US

Inspired art and consistently good writing make this the best *Transformers* series since the Marvel UK glory days. The only fault in this top-notch package lies in the pacing - for a six issue mini series, very little is actually happening! Nonetheless, this is a great comic that would be superb with denser plotting. Writer Furman used to squeeze all kinds of action into the short chapters that were a staple of the old UK weeklies, so it's not beyond him.

The Verdict: ***A highly polished, if somewhat uneventful, look at an often overlooked part of the Transformers mythos.*** **(KG)**

Tech Jacket #3

By Robert Kirkman, E.J. Su and Ron Riley
Image Comics, $2.95US

After the first two inspired issues this slips into uncomfortable territory. Whenever a hero goes off into space (unless his name is Green Lantern or Silver Surfer) it often tends to be a low point in the ongoing story. In this case with the story very fresh and still exciting for the reader, we're whisked off to the galaxy where the Tech Jacket comes from and Zack is recruited in a *Last Starfighter*-esque battle for his new jacket's rightful owners. But, it's still fun. It isn't the way I would have gone, but this is Kirkman's baby and he is proving to be a great find for comics. His new **Invincible** series (also for Image) has a quirkiness and he is surely a star for the future.

I do hope this series manages to sustain a long and, at the moment, deserved run because I'm intrigued to see what Kirkman has in store for young Zack when he returns to Earth – an Earth that will probably be full of these other new Image superhero creations.

The other two Image superhero books I've seen – **Firebreather** and **Venture** both have enough about them to make Image Comics' new superhero line a good looking prospect.

The Verdict: ***I'm impressed, you may well be.*** **(DRB)**

Raijin Comics #10

By various

Gutsoon, $4.95US

Gutsoon's 200-page weekly manga anthology is nothing if not eclectic, and the bang you get for your buck is spectacular. With eight series running, each 20-30 pages long, that's 8 new comics' worth per week at a price that compares rather favourably with the other prices you'll see in **The Verdict!**

Ah, but are those eight series worth it? At this price, that's a worry?? OK then, let's try to be critical - "try", because frankly I just don't know enough about manga to make any comparative assessments. Gutsoon are clearly trying out as many manga genres as they think will float in the American market, weighted in favour of hardcore martial arts action (Hara Tetsuo and Buronson's *Fist of The Blue Sky*, Itagaki Keisuke's *Baki The Grappler*, and Hojo Tsukasa's *City Hunter* for Jackie Chan fans) but leavened with variations such as Inoue Takehiko's basketball series *Slam Dunk* (huge in Japan, apparently), Tsugihara Ryuji and Hidaka Yoshiki's political thriller *The First President of Japan*, and lures for the female readers such as Sakurano Minene's *Guardian Angel Getten* (if you like *Oh My Goddess* you'll, um, notice that this is identical with it).

To pick out just two series, Ono Yoichiro and Ueno Jiro's *Revenge of Mouflon* is something of a mystery in that so far there's been no mention of anyone or anything called Mouflon or the slightest hint of any revenge - but otherwise it's a serious nail-biter of a variation on the old, old aeroplane disaster movie plot, a set up you'll all have encountered before but very sharply paced and with enough new twists thrown in to keep the excitement up. By way of complete contrast, Niwano Makoto's *Bomber Girl* could perhaps be described as "**Sailor Moon** with tits", but also with a very manic art style and loads of seriously face-distorting fisticuffs which all adds up to something quite unclassifiable, possibly very bad but also very entertaining. Sadly it's also the first series in the title to end, in #11, but look out for back issues.

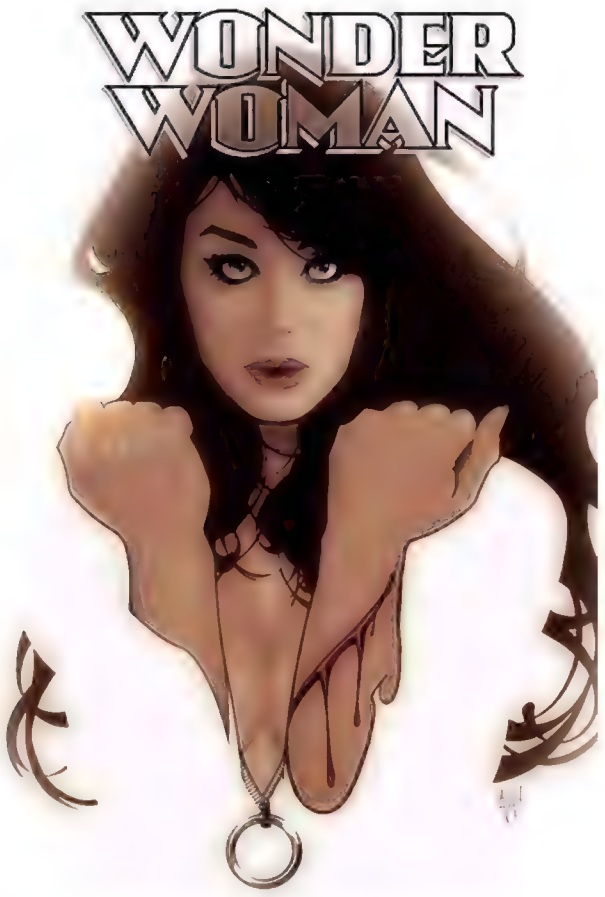
No nearer to knowing whether it's worth it? Neither am I. Two production aspects of **Raijin Comics** have put it on my regular order, though - the new "authentic" style which requires you to read from right to left and seems genuinely to enhance the dynamics, and editorial pages scattered around each issue which explain some of the Japanese sound effects... and "emotion" effects. I never knew manga had "emotion" effects... So maybe those aren't features that will specifically attract many people, but at this price, why not gamble?

***The Verdict:** It could be a fine and cheap introduction to the range of manga genres, it could be just another selection pitched squarely at US tastes in comics. Either way, it's fun, takes hours to read and won't break the bank.* **(MK)**

Wonder Woman #188

By Phil Jimenez and Andy Lanning

DC Comics, $2.25



Jimenez' final issue of **Wonder Woman** is unashamedly self-indulgent. Like his artistic mentor George Perez he leaves the book with one of those cutesy "day in the life" issues, and also grabs the opportunity to let everyone with long memories know just how much he digs the 1970s Lynda Carter *Wonder Woman* TV show: no less than *five* of the variant costumes designed for that show get shoehorned into the action. Oh, and those with averagely long memories who recall DC hyping a "WW gets it on with her boyfriend" scene about a year ago will finally find it here... and about all that can be said for it is that it's more explicit than anything so far in Marvel's "adults only" **Rawhide Kid**. But don't get all excited, lads, no-one gets their kit off...

Self-indulgence is, I fear, what Jimenez' run on this series has been all about. His ability to tell a story in pictures appears to have sharpened along the way, but his decision to take on the writing chores has resulted in one, long learning curve, at the end of which he still doesn't seem to have figured out how to pace a plot. A self-indulgent conclusion, then was all that could be expected. Even cover artist Adam Hughes seems to have caught that bug lately, experimenting away wildly with very variable results (this one's cover is black on black. Really eye-catching, that.). Hughes is sticking around, though, and it's very much to be hoped that he calms down a bit and that incoming writer Walt Simonson puts a bit of solidity back into Wonder Woman after two years' worth of creative jitters.

***The Verdict:** Unless you really have to have anything Jimenez draws, or unless you're a big fan of the Lynda carter series yourself, there's nothing much to recommend this rather sloppy farewell.* **(MK)**

THE COLLECTED VERDICT

TRADE PAPERBACK & GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

X-Statix #6

By Peter Milligan and Mike Allred
Marvel Comics, $2.25US/$3.75Can

The highlight of this first-rate issue is undoubtedly The Orphan's decision to act in the way public opinion polls portray him - a logical, if lunatic, progression of the *Big Brother* concept. Yet, cleverly, Milligan implies that all is not as it seems, although there is less depth here than is usual. With the exception of the "X-Statix don't like each other" plot, which is getting a bit old, this is as good as ever. Plotting, characterization and art are spot on, and there's a wonderfully creepy portrayal of Professor X, whose interest in Venus Dee Milo seems more than professional…

The Verdict: ***Still Marvel's best superhero title, but some of the subplots are dragging a tad.*** **(KG)**

X-Statix 7

By Peter Milligan and Mike Allred
Marvel Comics $2.25 US/$3.75 Can

Hurrah! The angry letters from **X-Force** fans are back! It truly is fascinating to see them complain about this comic even though it hasn't been called **X-Force** for seven issues. Elsewhere it's business as usual for Messrs Allred and Milligan, with the same blend of social critique, soap opera and superheroics. The slightly dull "the team is falling apart" plotline looks to be winding up, which is good news indeed, while Venus Dee Milo has a rather exciting, if predictable, plotline devoted to her past. And they do Professor X so much better in this book that he should be a regular character!

The Verdict: ***Marvel's best mutant book. Marvel's best team book. Marvel's best book? Probably.*** **(KG)**

Batman Year Two: Fear The Reaper.

By Mike Barr, Alan Davis, Todd McFarlane, Paul Neary, Alfredo Alcala and Mark Farmer
DC / Titan Books. £12.99

Put a big sticker over the bit on the cover that reads **Year Two** and you'll enjoy this book a whole lot more. Following Frank Miller's seminal retelling of Bruce Wayne's first year must have been the equivalent of a commission to write "The Bible 2" and, wisely, Mike W. Barr doesn't even attempt it. Instead he tells an exciting, if slightly old-fashioned (in comparison), Bat-tale involving the return of an earlier and more bloodthirsty Gotham vigilante, the Reaper. Along the way he answers certain important questions about the Bat mythos, such as why he doesn't use a gun - and just what happened to the man who killed his parents, Joe Chill. If certain elements seem a little contrived now, that's largely down to forced comparisons with Miller's original - though the Batman/Chill team-up perhaps strains credibility a little *too* far, even for the sake of dramatic irony.

The real plus in this book, though, is the art - beginning with Alan Davis' final issue of **Detective** (he'd drawn quite a few prior to **Year 2** - come on, DC, collect those in a trade!), followed by three from a fledgling (ie. much better than **Spawn**-era) Todd McFarlane, two of which are creepily inked by the wonderful Alfredo Alcala. The book looks great though, again, far more reminiscent of earlier Batman versions - particularly Marshall Rogers' run - than the gritty Mazzuchelli modernism of **Year One**.

Year Two has been collected before in trade, but this volume also includes Barr and Davis' prestige format **Batman: Full Circle**. It fits seemlessly here, rounding out the stories of both the Reaper and Chill. It's worth noting, though, that - as seems to be DC's policy at the moment - the paper stock used on this trade is of a much poorer quality than that of either the original or **Full Circle**.

The Verdict: ***Forget the title and this is a rip-roaring - if somewhat far-fetched - story with classy art and the origin of Jim Gordon's pipe to boot!*** **(RH)**

Daredevil: Visionaries

By Kevin Smith, Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti
Marvel Comics/$19.99/$29.95Can

The main reason I got this, chortle if you will, is because I knew that Ben Affleck wrote the foreword, and I thought it interesting to see his thoughts on a character he was to play years later on the big screen.

Reprinted here are the first eight issues of **Daredevil** volume two, the title currently being written by Brian Michael Bendis to great acclaim. Film-maker Kevin Smith's appearance as writer of this book was obviously a stunt to revive a floundering character, but his writing, though occasionally dense to the point of clumsiness, is effective, no doubt helped a great deal by now-Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada's interesting artwork.

On the surface, Smith deals maturely again with Christianity, particularly Catholicism, which is quite fitting for Daredevil, a character clothed in and surrounded by Christian imagery. However, the real delight here is what goes on underneath that, as Smith delivers an intricate mystery/conspiracy plot that is never less than entertaining. Like all well-constructed mysteries, it all makes perfect sense when you reach the end of the book, and much self-kicking occurs when the secrets are finally revealed and the reader looks back over the clues seeded throughout. As such, this also works very well as a self-contained story, with only the minimum of Marvel Universe continuity demands. There are better **Daredevil** stories that deal more with the character himself, but the plot here is exceptionally strong, and if you were to only get one **Daredevil** book, this is an excellent consideration.

All that said, there is one sticking point, and it's one that almost ruins this book for me. The portrayal of the mastermind behind the plot not only rings false (which might be tolerable), but threatens to derail the whole story, by putting incongruity at the heart of it. Obviously I cannot reveal the villain's identity, but suffice to say that his actions here are not only uncharacteristic, but seem to harm something at the core of the character. Smith tries to justify those actions in an interesting way, but nonetheless it just seems wrong.

However, if you can put that aside, this is a highly enjoyable read.

The Verdict: ***Not the best** Daredevil **story, but one of the best, and perfect for newcomers or those who just want a quick dip into Daredevil's world.*** **(KG)**

Elektra: Introspect

By Greg Rucka, Carlo Pagulayan, Joe Bennett, Greg Hom and Danny Miki
Marvel Comics, $16.99

Firstly, much credit to Greg Rucka for being the first writer ever (Miller and Bendis included) to succeed in making Elektra an interesting solo character. It's always difficult when your hero is a cold-blooded killer but by forcing the character to face up to her murderous history, as the antagonist does here, Rucka creates the most sympathetic Elektra story yet. This bodes well for the writer's upcoming **Wolverine** series, though it's disappointing to read that his replacement on this book already plans to disregard Rucka's character development and return Ms. Natchios to the tough-gal cliché she's been saddled with since she left DD.

Praise for Rucka's writing aside, this volume is still a disappointment - for a couple of important reasons. Though the main story's art by Carlo Pagulayan is several steps up from the blocky, colourless Chuck Austen mess that preceded it, it's book-ended here by a flashy but empty Joe Bennett set-up story (essentially 22 pages of Elektra on the dole) and a vile CGI fluff piece illustrated by cheesecake cover "artist" Greg Horn. And though **Introspect** itself is a riveting, formula-breaking read, it's also a very FAST read. Six and a half issues go by in less than half an hour – and for seventeen bucks, that feels like a kind of Elektra-extortion.

The Verdict: ***A refreshing approach to the character from Rucka, but it's all over far too soon.*** **(RH)**

The Sandman Presents: The Furies

By Mike Carey and John Bolton
DC/Vertigo / Titan Books, $24.95US / £24.99UK

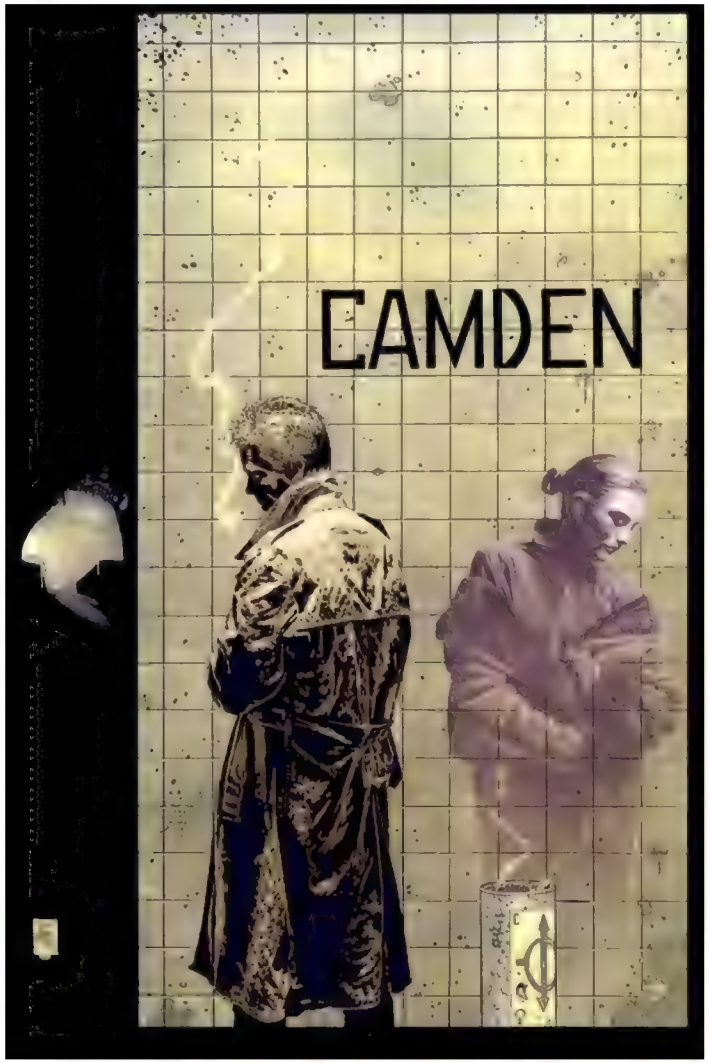
A hardcover graphic novel from **Lucifer**'s Mike Carey that confirms him as worthy successor - and possible superior - to Neil Gaiman. This is the story of Lyta Hall - ex-**Infinity Inc**. heroine The Fury and mother of Daniel, the second Sandman. As such it's enmeshed in plots and characters from Gaiman's old **Sandman** series and will be difficult to follow for anyone not well versed in the Endless. That said, there are surely enough Gaimanites out there willing to pay a high price tag to see more of these characters, and Carey delivers an intricate, if at times exposition-heavy, story that plays with both Greek myth and Greek tragedy, while John Bolton offers his best photo-surrealistic painted art job yet. Forget Alex Ross - if we must have painted comic books, this is how they should look!

It's frustrating, though, that Carey is so in love with the Gaiman universe that he's unwilling to step out of its playground and create something new for himself. As long as he remains chained by the shadows of the **Sandman**, he'll never make his mark outside that clique - and for a writer of his calibre, that's a tremendous shame.

The Verdict: ***Another sumptuous treat for Sandman fans, but for Sandman fans alone.*** **(RH)**

Hellblazer: Haunted

By Warren Ellis and John Higgins
DC/Vertigo / Titan, £10.99



On his first day at school, Warren Ellis took a thick 2B pencil and wrote a story about a foul-mouthed, chain-smoking bastard who sees the world for the vile and vulgar dungeon it really is, but can't help but hope for better. If ever a writer was destined to work on John Constantine, it was Ellis. It's just a tragedy his run was cut so short, thanks to editorial interference and the banning of a "controversial" high school massacre story.

Of course WE could write JC in his sleep, but the success of **Hellblazer** often rests with the supporting cast, and here Ellis excels - from the chilling Underground maintenance-magician Map to sadistic copper Watford, with good old Chas the taxi driver thrown in for light relief. The best character in **Haunted**, though, is London itself, a city of death, its streets running with blood, shit and worse. Artist John Higgins gives you this grubbiness full on - vomit, dirty syringes and rotting baby corpses - then finds unexpected beauty in bubble mix, full moons and ambulance lights. You get the feeling both artist and writer love their capital – and hate it at the same time.

An excellent collection then, though frustrating as it reminds us of just how much potential Warren Ellis had on this title. Maybe one day he'll take another shot at Constantine… and maybe a second trade paperback collection, complete with that infamous censored issue, might just persuade him. Hint, DC, hint.

The Verdict: ***Warren Ellis is to John Constantine what Woody Allen is to short-arse Jewish neurotics.*** *Hellblazer* ***has rarely been better.*** **(RH)**

The Invisibles: The Invisible Kingdom

By Grant Morrison, Phillip Bond, Warren Pleece, Sean Phillips, Frank Quitely et al.
DC/Vertigo / Titan Books £17.99

I'll be honest - I probably didn't understand *half* of what I read in the final volume of **The Invisibles**. You might think this would frustrate me, bore me or else have me proclaiming the author to be a pretentious arse unfit to be working in a pop medium like comics… except I'm convinced **The Invisibles** plays on my lack of understanding and turns that into fear. This is a horror comic after all, and our greatest fear is that which we don't understand.

If you've already devoured the previous six essential volumes (and until you have, don't even *try* to get your head around this one!) and you think you're ready for just how weird Grant Morrison's imagination can get - prepare to think again. Even by the mind-warping standards already set by this book, **The Invisible Kingdom** is something else entirely. Here *The Sweeney* meets *The Prisoner* and *The Wicker Man*, David Lynch rubs shoulders with the Marquis De Sade, and Stephen Hawking is groped in a corner by William S. Burroughs. New characters are introduced (most notably the stunning linguist Helga), old ones meet their destinies (you almost feel sorry for Sir Miles) and the secret of the universe is revealed. Time and narrative structure are twisted, folded and doubled back into themselves, and in the final pages the baton for fighting the Invisible War is handed over to us - the readers, the future.

"What was your face before you were born?" "How many sides does spaghetti have?" "Are you ready to be initiated into the oldest trick in the book?" Perhaps if we knew the answers, it wouldn't all be so damned scary. At times it's impossibly impenetrable, then heartbreakingly touching, then laugh-out-loud hilarious. I could probably re-read this comic every day for the rest of my life and still not grasp it all… but I'd certainly never be bored. This is Grant Morrison's greatest triumph… or else his greatest deception.

The Verdict: ***The most mind-boggling comic book ever written.*** **(RH)**

JLA: A League of One

By Christopher Moeller
DC / Titan Books, $21.25

Or, to be more accurate, **Wonder Woman: A League of One**. Only DC's marketing department can truly believe this is a fully-fledged JLA adventure when it's clear the token female is, for once, the star. Writer/painter Christopher Moeller provides a timely *LOTR* style adventure here (complete with elves, nymphs and the last and nastiest dragon on Earth), forcing Diana into combat against the other Leaguers after an oracle prophesies death for whoever takes on this latest "end of the world" threat. The various defeats she hands out to her teammates are well conceived (particularly the simple but ingenious way she deals with Green Lantern) though the final battle plays out pretty much as you'd expect. Moeller's paints bring a Vertigo sheen to the story rarely seen in the DC Universe but his Wonder Woman is perfect - not the spangly bimbo some hot babe artists portray, but a strong woman steeped in both age and wisdom. And there's something vaguely Gaimanesque about the script which will either delight or irritate you, depending on your preferences. The cover's a bit of a let down though, with Moeller forced to include all seven Leaguers - the back cover shot of Diana is much more eye-catching.

The Verdict: ***A great Wonder Woman adventure with added epic fantasy stuff for the LOTR fans and guest appearances by the rest of the JLA.*** **(RH)**

JLA/JSA: Virtue and Vice

By David Goyer, Geoff Johns, Carlos Pacheco and Jesus Merino
DC / Titan Books, $24.95 / £24.99

Make no mistake, this is a gorgeous book. Ninety-four glossy pages crammed with colourful characters and delicious Carlos Pacheco art (anyone who read **Avengers Forever** will know how well he handles these multi-character epics) in a sturdy, shiny hardcover that will remind British readers of old UK Annuals. It's the sort of book any superhero fan would be proud to keep on their shelf and even as I'm writing this review, I can't resist another riffle through its beautiful pages - heck, it even *smells* lovely!

But - and come on, you saw this question coming - is the story really up to such lavish production values? Unfortunately, it's not. **Virtue and Vice** is just another big team crossover with loads of characters (each given their own moment to shine), a variety of ever-escalating threats, and a couple of twists thrown in to keep the story chugging. Plot innovation is scarce and the script is merely workmanlike, without the spark or humour that made Grant Morrison's JLA hardcover, **Earth-2**, worthy of both the format and extra expense. It's not bad writing - it's just dull writing. And there's no excuse for that with characters this good. Still... it looks *lovely*!

The Verdict: ***If you place art above story, this is the book - and the format - for you.*** **(RH)**

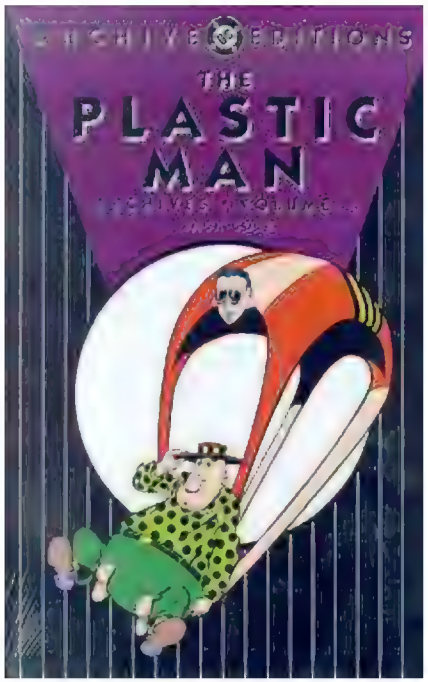
Starman: A Wicked Inclination/Times Past

By James Robinson, Tony Harris, Wade Von Grawbadger et al.
DC / Titan Books, £14.99 / £13.99

Volumes three and four of DC's **Starman** collection showcase the title at its best and its worst - but don't worry too much, even the worst isn't *that* bad. **A Wicked Inclination** continues the growth of Jack Knight as both a superhero and a man. ("You may be a hero," an old girlfriend tells him as the story begins, "but that still doesn't make you a nice person.") Highlights here include the Eisner-awarded four-parter *Sand & Stars* in which Jack unearths a few skeletons from his father's closet thanks to guest star Wesley Dodds (it's interesting to note how maturely Robinson deals with the sex-lives of his superheroes - even octogenarians like Dodds - in comparison to the sniggering prurience of Kevin Smith) and the excellent *Hell And Back* in which Jack goes to Hell to rescue the Shade and Matt O'Dare. Typically for Robinson, the three make their escape through talking, not fighting. The slowly building subplots and novelistic structure impress even more when read in collected format, while Tony Harris' art remains stylish and expressive throughout, aided by class work from Chris Sprouse, Guy Davis and others.

The first collection of **Times Past** adventures (flashbacks to earlier tales from the history of Opal City and its inhabitants) suffers a little from a lack of focus, and from bringing together disparate one-shots that worked better interspersed between longer stories in the original series. There are some excellent moments - among them the Shade's friendship with Oscar Wilde, and a terrible "growing up" moment for the JSA - but there are also some weaker and padded stories, most notably the one featuring 70's Starman Mikaal Tomas with its patchy, overcoloured Craig Hamilton artwork and strained disco tastic puns. However, this volume does benefit from the inclusion of the Shade's Journal entries, fascinating prose work that offers further evidence of Robinson's genius.

The Verdict: ***The essential collection for any superhero fan (and many who, like Jack Knight himself, just don't care for costumes).*** **(RH)**



Plastic Man Archives Volume Four

By Jack Cole

DC Comics, $49.95

More than any other of the DC Archives series, these hardbacks collecting Jack Cole's work on his own creation show the growth of a single creative talent. It's been some years since Art Spiegelman raised Cole's work to the level of "Art", firstly in his famous *New Yorker* magazine feature and later in the extended version of that feature which formed the body of **Jack Cole And Plastic Man**, his collaborative book with designer Chip Kidd. In that period, Plastic Man has re-emerged from the mire into which he had sunk, becoming a member of the Justice League of America (and according to Batman, becoming one of the more powerful of that group), starring in a Ty Templeton-masterminded one-shot and soon to be Kyle Baker's next graphic novel project.

This volume (and the three previous ones) shows Cole's development as a creator. They remove these Plastic Man stories not only from the context of the **Police Comics** issues from whence they came but also from the format of both **Police Comics** and **Plastic Man** the comic book, and in doing this they also isolate Cole's work and allow a greater concentration on it. More importantly than that, they also remove the work from the constraints of time.

As such, the Archives format gives us not only a beautifully-presented, high-quality record of this work, but also shows us the growth of Cole's abilities in a time-compressed, artificially accelerated manner - we see in the course of four volumes an evolution that originally took places over a period of five years. A foreword by Andreas C. Knigge states that Cole "didn't like anybody else touching his work or dealing with his characters" and that Cole did not use assistants until the end of 1950, by when **Plastic Man** the comic book had become a bi-monthly publication; therefore this work can be considered to be a pure singular vision, more than can any other studio-produced work in similar pamphlet format. Of course, any of the Archives series presents the same "time-lapse" effect, but most of the comics re-presented in these were the work of a writer working with an artist (or artists) rather than that of one dedicated creator.

What is most immediately visible in this volume is a rapid change in Cole's linework (his style seems to alter enormously between issues 48 and 49 of **Police Comics** in late 1945, but the book lists no creative involvement from other artists) and a refinement of the visual humour that was the Plastic Man trademark, but also a gradual darkening in the story content. This leads the stories into more serious - almost tragic - areas. Certainly there's a more moral edge, with criminals who usually would end up wound in one of Plas' coiled, constrictive arms now falling in front of the train they planned would deliver their ill-gotten gains.

A striking realisation brought about by this volume is that Cole rarely drew a traditional femme fatale. All of his characters, regardless of gender, are grotesques of some kind, but his women in particular always seem to be stately Margaret Dumont galleons or bun-haired little old ladies. The youthful female, let alone the attractive youthful female, is scarcely seen in Cole's world, which seems odd given his later success with "Females By Cole" for *Playboy*. There is perhaps one woman in this entire volume who conforms to the usual comics female figure, and even she is something of an oddball. What does this say about Cole? Take your own guess; it'll be as good as any other.

The crucial question is, though: "Is this book worth fifty dollars?" Well, a lot of younger readers will find the artwork crude and, given Cole's way of guiding the eye around the page, confusing. His storytelling methods are astonishingly sophisticated given that they were executed fifty years ago; so much so that they actually seem still to be breaking new ground today. The act of reading these strips is not the easy ride given by so many of today's comics, and as such may be an alienating experience for some. Alienating, but sumptuous; the restorers have done a fine job, showing Cole's linework sharp and clear with colours which can only be assumed to be faithful to the originals (who can get to see those original comics these days except Steve Geppi?). All of which is secondary, next to the simple truths that Jack Cole was a genius, and his Plastic Man stories should be required reading for everybody.

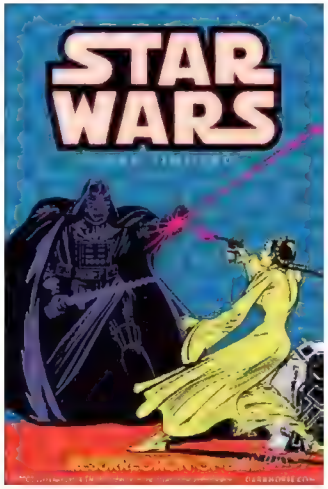
The Verdict: ***Expensive but worthwhile slice of comics history, breaking all manner of rules and showing the way to do things, even after fifty years. Smash that piggybank.*** **(MSh)**

Star Wars: A Long Time Ago... Volume 3: Resurrection of Evil

By Archie Goodwin, Al Williamson, Carmine Infantino, Walt Simonson et al.

Dark Horse / Titan Books, $29.95

Continuing Dark Horse's collection of Marvel's old **Star Wars** comic, this starts wonderfully with the serialised adaptation of the best of the original trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back* and some powerful, evocative artwork by Al Williamson - probably the comic artist who best captured the feel of the films on paper. The volume is worth its price for these six issues alone… which is a good job, because the quality slips somewhat thereafter. The writers struggle to follow the cliffhanger of u: *TESB* and are further hampered by losing their best character to carbonite. Musical creators breaks the flow too - with Barr, Claremont, Hama and others taking brief stints - though only the Williamson-illustrated #50 and a two-parter by David Michelinie, Walt Simonson and Tom Palmer really stand up now. Still, there's fun to be had here for most *Star Wars* buffs, and credit must go to Dark Horse for the glorious full-colour reproductions - they could so easily have gone the route of black & white toilet paper reprints a la Marvel's **Essentials**.



The Verdict: ***The greatest Star Wars film adapted by the greatest Star Wars artist - and loads of other nonsense besides.*** **(RH)**

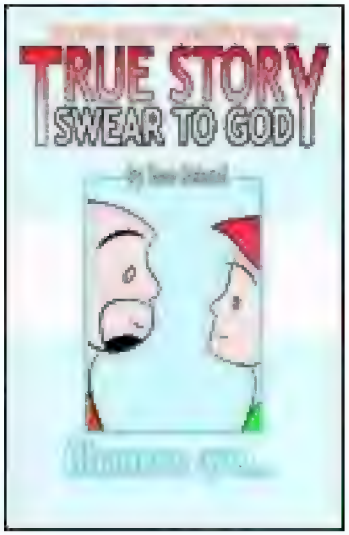
True Story: Swear To God. Chances Are...

By Tom Beland

AiT / PlanetLar, $14.95

"This is a romance book," observes autobiographical hero Tom Beland halfway through his book, "and well, they don't **make** romance books anymore." Yet the true story of Californian cartoonist Beland's real life romance with Puerto Rican journalist Lily Garcia succeeded in warming even this reviewer's jaded, cynical heart because of its ordinariness and its honesty. It's ordinary because the obstacles that come between the two lovers aren't the usual contrived "romcom" clichés but simply those of distance and culture. It's honest because, despite Beland's self-confessed inability to do justice to his emotions with clumsy words (his cartoons are much more expressive), the author is candid about himself and his insecurities - from a failed teenage marriage to doubts over his storytelling ability to problems with the wedding tackle - in a way that's seldom seen in the often self-aggrandising field of autobiog. Though I began this book thinking I wouldn't make it to the end (the early romance is a little cloying), I soon found myself swept along by the characters - the *people* - and their feelings for each other.

The only thing that lets **TS:STG** down (other than the unwieldy title) is the lack of a decent editorial presence - or at the very least a proofreader! Particularly in the opening stages, the narrative suffers from awkward tense shifts for no reason at all, and the book is troubled by spelling and grammatical errors that occasionally jolt the reader away from the story. Beland explains midway why he chose to publish as is, and by then you'll have either warmed to his reasons or given up trying. A shame if it's the latter.



The Verdict: ***A sweet depiction of a loving relationship, undramatised and refreshingly honest. Just don't show it to your proofreader mates.*** **(RH)**

Wolverine Legends Volume 1: Wolverine/Hulk

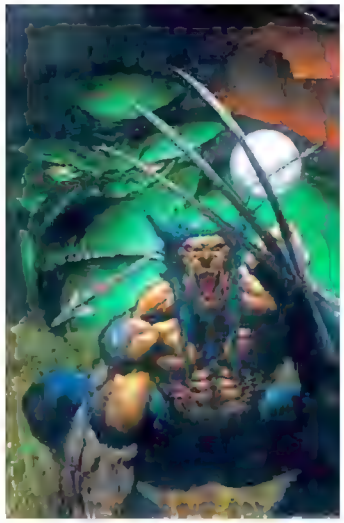
By Sam Kieth

Marvel Comics, $9.99

I have to wonder how this went down with the hardcore Wolverine fans, because it's Sam Kieth at his quirkiest - and while that means only good things to the more discerning comic book fan, it might have boiled the blood of a few *Snikt*-o-philes.

Having crash-landed his plane in the wilderness, Logan finds a little girl who desperately needs his help to rescue herself and her daddy from an icy lake. Is the girl a mutant? How long has it been since she crashed? Can Logan possibly hope to save her, or is she already a goner? And what about her big, green Uncle Bruce?

What follows is a touching and comic misadventure, mixing cartoon fight-scenes with childhood innocence and leading to a climax in which brute force and claws can't save the day - but kindness can. Keith's art comes on like Bill Sienkiewicz drawing Bugs Bunny - it's big, it's hairy, it's beautiful. And while the book is not entirely on a par with his **Zero Girl** or **Four Women**, it's not far off. (On an entirely unrelated note, I do wish Marvel would standardise the height of their trade paperbacks - my bookcase looks like a castle wall!)



The Verdict: ***How many times have you read a comic about the two meanest critters in the Marvel Universe that left you with the warm fuzzies?*** **(RH)**

X-Force Volume 2: The Final Chapter

By Peter Milligan, Mike Allred, Darwyn Cooke and Duncan Fegredo

Marvel Comics, $19.99

If you've been reading **Borderline** for a while now, you'll know that if there's one book pretty much all our reviewers agree on, it's **X-Force**. And it's not just us - you can hardly go anywhere these days without hearing good things about Milligan and Allred's shrewd satire on the media, showbiz, mutants and people everywhere. **X-Force** is the *Big Brother*, *Jerry Springer* and *Pop Idol* of mutant books, but it's far smarter than any of its influences. So what else can I tell you about the second and final (pre-relaunch) collection? How about that it's a wonderfully touching *and* tragic love story? How about that it tackles issues of gender, race, politics and sexuality head-on - not as trendy side issues but as the driving force behind the main plot and integral character development? How about that it features the best new mutant created in years (Dead Girl) and the most unsung (Doop's solo adventure goes unnoticed even by his teammates!)? And though I still don't care for Mike Allred's art (sorry, Mike!), I can't deny that it's perfect for these characters... so I guess it's growing on me.

The Verdict: ***It may not ride high in the monthly ratings, but I'm betting this book sells loads in trade format. If you're not reading it - you're just not cool.*** **(RH)**

ZINE SEEN

Giant Clam #3

£1.30 from Ralph Kidson, 3 Langridges Close, Newick, E. Sussex BN8 4LZ, UK

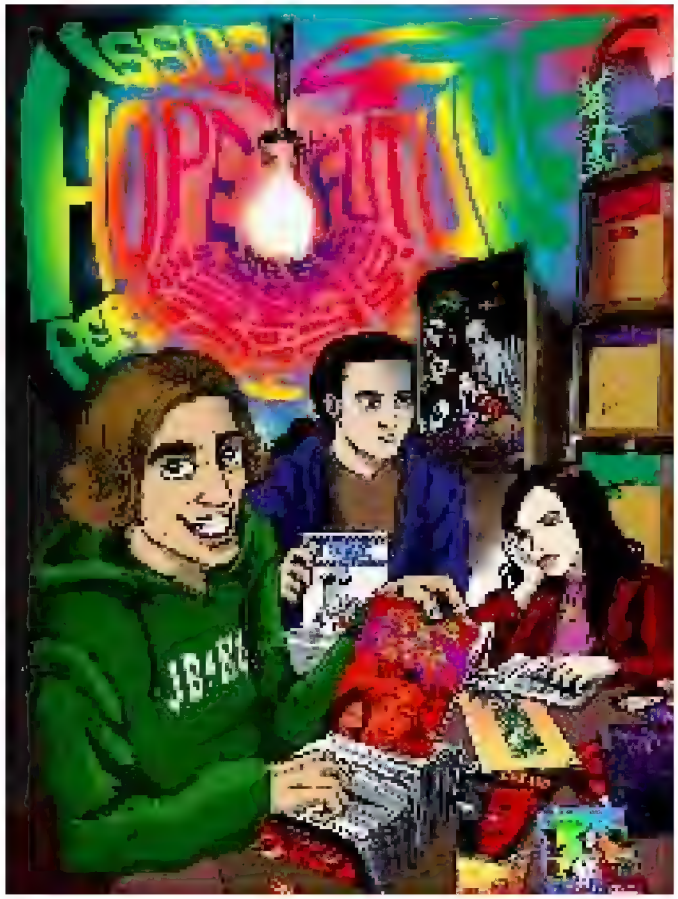
I've said it before, I'll doubtless say it again, but Ralphie is the master of mundane minimalism. The third page in this issue has 10 panels, each containing a static picture of Stick (a twig, with a fork in it), Envelope (er, an envelope) and two cans of beer – a crab also appears on the periphery of the first three panels. The page contains just four words of dialogue, one of them rude, none of them connected with any dialogue on any other pages. I laughed out loud, uncontrollably, and you will too. It's all in the timing, you see; apart from Dave Sim I can think of no other cartoonists so adept at using silence and punctuating it with dialogue at just the right places, and with just the right words, to hit you directly on the funnybone. And Sim doesn't do that so much these days, I hear.

In other parts of this issue we see Stick and Envelope discussing the etiquette of queuing in shops, learn that they're on holiday in the Arctic Circle and will probably go to Tenerife next time, and subsequently watch them having some cheap fun with a Spanish phrasebook. It's all just so incredibly *normal*, the stuff of everyday conversation with just a touch of absurdity, and put across with crystal clarity in Ralph's usual ratty, deceptively vague line, paradoxical as that may seem. Tim Brown contributes a couple of nice vignettes in which we see Ralph draw his annual comic and abuse everyone at a comics convention… and another small, humorous masterpiece draws to a close.

The Verdict: ***If comics artists had the same cultural clout as stand-up comedians, Ralph would be a mega-star. He should be anyway.*** **(MK)**

Hope For The Future #4 and #5

By Simon Perrins; available now on CD as a PDF for £1.50 (or, if you have a fast connection, for download free at http://www.bugpowder.btintemet.co.uk/) from Simon Perrins, 1 Newton Park Mansions, St. Mary's Road, Leeds LS7 3JX, UK



It's **Hope For The Future #4**, it's Halloween, and as the regular cast of enthusiastically geeky students and mystically-inclined girlfriend (they wish) sit around in a café fending off trick or treaters, they each tell a story about what they've been up to since they last got together. Perrins illustrates the linking sections in his usual lucid, attractive style. Jon Lycett-Smith turns in a nicely cartooned story of a disastrous foray into a literally hellish nightclub. Richard Smith, of **Cheronna** fame, goes to town on the hallucinatory aspects of a tale about an encounter with ergot. Finally, **Goathland** star John Welding presents a darkly menacing vision of magical mishaps on the Yorkshire moors. It all adds up to a very diverting read laden with all kinds of pop cultural references (and one fake fine art one) and with the cheerfully insistent characterisation of the "heroes" as idiots that **Hope For The Future** readers have come to expect.

On a technical level, the cover and the back pages (the latter full of biographical and apocryphal information all collaged together) make fine creative use of the PDF format. The story pages, being designed to be commercially printed, require scrolling for onscreen reading, which can be irritating… but of course you can always print it out for yourself. The imagery comes across very strongly in the format, at a good size and with extreme clarity. Unless you really must have a printed and saddle-stitched copy, send off for the PDF version and enjoy one of the best student-oriented small press comics around.

The Verdict: ***It's good to see a small press creator making such effective use of the PDF format.*** **(MK)**

At the heart of **Hope For The Future #5** is a joke which is only funny once, and the comic itself tries, but largely fails, to transcend the "students/twentysomethings" formula that pops up so often in self-published and small press titles from Britain.

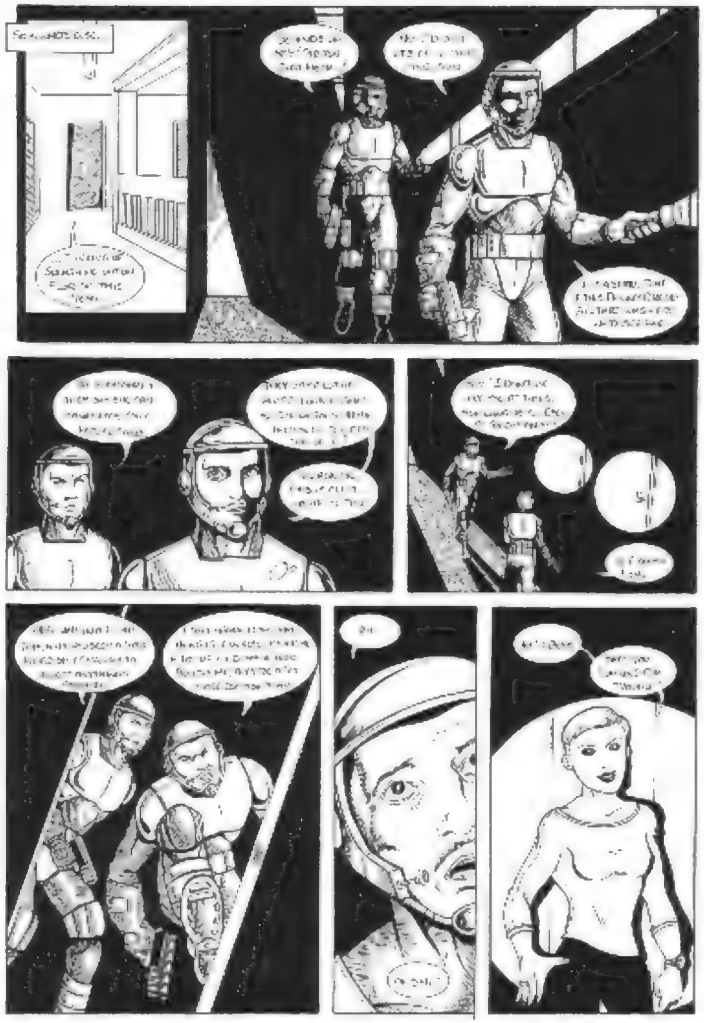
And yet, I found this to be well worth reading. The writing is adequate, but unimaginative and often clumsy, so much of the success of this comic lies in the excellent art used throughout, and the wonderful sense of design evident in the way it was put together. The comic also has a great deal of charm and a truly infectious enthusiasm all of which mean that even though it has its flaws, it certainly stands as one of the better small-press comics. Once you've got your copies of "**Violent!** and **The O Men**, you could do much worse than shell out your hard-earned on this.

The Verdict: ***There certainly are better small press comics around, but the superb production values of this title make it well worth a look, if only to see what the small press is capable of.*** **(KG)**

Pest Control #3

By Grant Springford; £1.30 from Grant Springford, 2 Cawston Court, Highland Road, Bromley BR1 4AF, UK

Martin Eden and Grant Springford have got together to start up a joint small press imprint, Ominous Comics, from which this and Eden's **The O Men #18** are the first offerings. Their pooling of resources makes a lot of sense: both creators share an offbeat approach to superheroics, more psychological than action-oriented, and both tend towards very clear-lined art which eschews background detail and exploits the atmospheric dynamics of clean whites and solid blacks.

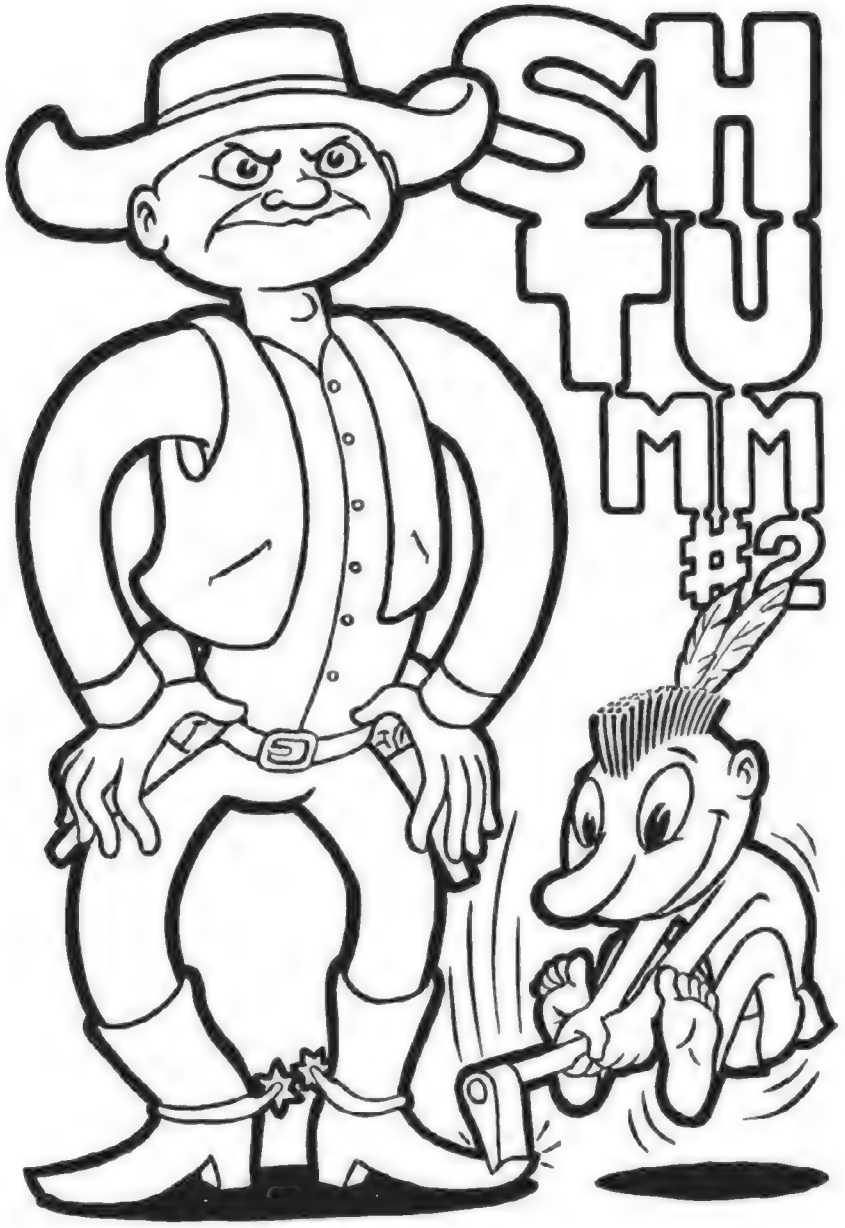


Some might suggest that Springford is simply following Eden's lead here, but while a measure of influence is certainly detectable, Springford's quite plainly his own man, pursuing his own storytelling paths. The sharply drawn, moody and enigmatic character vignettes making up this issue reveal an individual way with dialogue, providing very little hard information, many elusive clues and a real sense of place and personality. Check it out – these guys aren't ripping each other off, they're developing a very British and very intriguing "house style" which could well spawn a whole new, exciting approach to superhero comics.

The Verdict: ***If the US publishers haven't caught up with Ominous Comics yet, they could well be missing the wave of the future.*** **(MK)**

Shtumm #2

By various; £1.20, $2.00 or €2.00 from Andy, P.O. Box 8892. London SW15, UK, or Andy, Hohenstrasse 20, 60385 Frankfurt am Main, Germany



Another richly varied and diverting collection of wordless strips from Andy, beautifully printed and full of quiet joys and juxtapositions. Of the latter, the adjacent placement of Wittek's punkishly exuberant depiction of sex in all its grossness next to Reinder Dijkhuis and Geir Strøm's charmingly wicked account of prehensile love particularly delights the palate. Lewis Trondheim offers up a superb essay in slapstick – and in 60 panels on a single page, his handling of the nuances of tiny drawing leaving me wondering if he's been looking at Maaike Hartjes's work. Thomas Ott contributes another of his darkly humorous looks at death, Marcel Ruitjers plays with the possibilities for infinite repetition in the concept of *Ourobouros*, Andy reprints a fine example of A.B. Frost's wordless strips from the 1880s or possibly 1890s… there are far too many delights here to list, let alone to do critical justice to.

The Verdict: ***Buy both issues of* Shtumm *and discover, if you haven't already, how much variety and narrative content can be encompassed by wordless comics.*** **(MK)**

MANGA SEEN

WITH KEVIN HILL

Ghost In The Shell: Man Machine Interface 1

Shirow, Dark Horse/ Studio Proteus

I have no idea what's going on in this book. But it looks pretty. CGI, Shirow's high quality, and detailed, artwork. But I have no idea what's going on in this book.

The Verdict: ***I have no idea what's going on in this book, but it looks pretty (have I already said that?).***

I.N.V.U Vol.1

Kim Kang Won

Tokyopop, $9.99

Tokyopop's romantic invasion continues with this translated Korean story. The lead character, Sey, gets thrown into chaos by her mother moving to Italy and leaving Sey in the (in?)capable hands of Meja, Meja's husband, and the unusual entity known as Terry. Sey doesn't hit it off with Terry, but by the end of the book she begins to understand why Terry is so difficult. Romance in the book comes in the forms of Siho Lee, a rebellious student, and Mr. Cho, a teacher - and long-time friend - of Sey. Kim handles the characters nicely - there are few two-dimensional personalities. The artwork suits the style of the story, and lets it mix well with Tokyopop's other girls comics like *Paradise Kiss* and *Peach Girl*.

The Verdict: ***a curious romance story that's worth the entry fee - and you really should read it to find out what's unusual about Terry.***

Lupin III Vol.2

Monkey Punch

Tokyopop, $9.99

Arsene Lupin III is a thief. That's what this book is about, a master thief. Lupin, and his main crony Jigen, face off against various enemies, including the beautiful Fujiko Mine, and zany copper Inspector Zenigata. What you get, however, is an anarchic series of stories that often beggar belief. Monkey Punch's artwork varies in quality scene by scene, but retains a constant cartoon-like style, that actually does suit the story.

The Verdict: ***The lack of a solid story line, or solid artwork, hurts the comic in this reviewer's opinion - but I suspect that could also prove to be part of the charm to others. The Japanese certainly like it.***

Rave Master Vol.1

Mashima

Tokyopop $9.99

Another new title from Tokyopop. This one is firmly set in the fantasy mould. Following a fairly standard Japanese story, *Rave Master* features the adventures of a teenage boy, in this case one called Haru Glory, who obtains a power in the form of a Rave. No, not the dance music type. Raves are artefacts that can imbue the user, or objects capable of containing the Rave, with power. As with all stories, you need enemies, and Haru's enemies come in the form of a villainous society called Demon Card, who use Dark Brings - evil equivalents to Raves - in their quest for world domination... or something. This issue firmly establishes all of these facts, introducing members of Demon Card (ooh they're evil), along with a former Rave user (it sounds like some form of drug, doesn't it?) named Shiba, and finally Plue, the Rave's bearer - he's some weird dog-like thing whose head looks like a snowman, complete with a horn that looks like a carrot (I kid you not). Mashima's art style is very reminiscent of Akira 'Dragon Ball' Toriyama's, and also bears some resemblance to Eichi 'One Piece' Oda's, it's not a realistic style, but - as with *Dragon Ball* and *One Piece* - suits the action-packed parts of the adventure.

The Verdict: Rave ***is a fun adventure, that sits nicely alongside most other Japanese adventure stories.***

Shonen Jump Vol.1 #2

Various

Viz $4.95

Viz are too kind. Five bucks is amazing value for money. Bringing *Shonen Jump* to the west has been one of Viz's biggest gambles. On the strength of the titles that it contains, it's a success. The continuation of kids-favourite *Dragon Ball Z* helps, but so does the inclusion of two other already popular stories in *Yu-Gi-Oh* and *Yu Yu Hakusho*. Pirate story *One Piece*, a manic adventure comedy starring a rubber boy named Monkey D. Luffy, is just starting out, and is another damn good reason to buy the book (and it is a book, coming it at around 330 pages), and so is *Sandland*, a post-apocalyptic action comedy from Akira Toriyama, creator of *Dragon Ball*. The addition of ninja series *Naruto* just makes the package all the more desirable for any fan of Japanese comics.

The Verdict: ***Just buy an issue, okay? If you don't like it, you haven't been screwed as badly as you would have been paying 2 bucks for 32 pages, and you can always pass it on to someone else to enjoy.***

Bambi Alternative

Atsushi Kaneko

Beam Comix/ Enterbrain

A bit of a weird one this, as it's entirely Japanese and - me not being particularly, or even slightly, fluent - I have no idea what people are saying. The thing is, this doesn't seem to matter. Atsushi's art style, which I guess you could consider a cross between Eduardo Risso and Coop (the guy who does the sexy devil girls), and his abilities to tell a story, help prevent a lack of knowledge of Japanese from being a major problem. The flow between panels is almost perfectly preserved, and each panel makes it clear exactly what is going on - for effect Atsushi also uses simple pencil drawing to provide a child-like view of one of the short stories contained within this volume. The stories themselves are extremely violent, with bodies literally littering panels - and plenty of blood. The sheer extent of the violence, that includes a gutted dog, young girls stabbing each other, a man with a taste for biting necks open, a man's heart being torn out, and dozens of shootings, could be considered over the top... but when it's so nicely presented, it feels okay to revel in such violence. Perhaps it shouldn't.

The Verdict: ***Okay, so it's in Japanese, but Atsushi Kaneko could really do with being looked at as an artist.***

WEB SITES SEEN

Brad The Vampire

www.bradthevampire.co.uk

This quirky online strip started off as a rather odd supernatural humour strip with decent writing but some scrappy art. As time has gone on, creator Richard Bellingham has eased off the single-page gag format and has tended toward a more character-based soap opera feel, albeit with some strange characters. Feuds between families of werewolves and clans of vampires, sinister priests, the struggle to find a decent boyfriend/girlfriend and hold on to them, and the tensions of flat-sharing have all been elements of this entertaining strip. Bellingham writes each situation very well, portraying them sensitively (as with earlier stories dealing with homosexuality and tolerance), as well as with a good sense of humour and dramatic tension. The rough art of earlier strips has developed into a more competent, solid style, with enough of a cartoony element to suit the light-hearted aspects of the strip.

WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM, ANYWAY?
WHAT DO YOU HAVE AGAINST GIAY PEOPLE?
I DUNNO. JUST MAKES ME KIND OF SICK TO MY STOMACH.
AWWW... AND IT'S SUCH A NICE STOMACH.
I AM SO GONNA WHUP YOUR ASS...
WELL I WOULD IF YOU WEREN'T ABLE TO TURN INTO A BLOODY BIG WOLF MAN AND TEAR MY HEAD OFF.

Add to that an enthusiastic forum/message board and an online shop, and this site is an entertaining and refreshing change from the usual online strip fare.
The Verdict: An acquired taste, perhaps, but always good fun. (KG)

The Official Peanuts Website

www.snoopy.com

I've just moved to St Paul, Minnesota, and just today I was driving about and I noticed statues of Lucy from **Peanuts** all over the place. "What's that about?" says I. "Charles Schultz was from around here," says my better half, "He was something of a local hero." Straight back home I go to find out more. I figure the official site is a decent place to start.

It is a colourful and attractive looking site, with a nice simple layout and easy navigation, and even a cursor/mouse pointer that looks like Snoopy's head! All the colour and graphics make it a little slow to load each page, however, so those with slow connections beware.

The various pages are informative without being too packed with information, giving the viewer a good primer on the world of Snoopy and friends. The illustrated timeline is a particularly interesting feature, showing just how much these very familiar characters have changed over the years since their introduction. My favourite feature, however, is the tribute section, highlighting a special event that followed Schultz' death in which the creators of a number of "rival" newspaper strips each did a **Peanuts**-themed or -inspired strip in memory of the great cartoonist.

All the usual features are present, including the obligatory merchandise shop and an archive of **Peanuts** strips, making this a well-constructed and comprehensive site. My only problem with it, therefore, is that I never really "got" **Peanuts**. Perhaps it's because it was too highbrow or too American, but I never liked it as a strip. Nonetheless, it's a good site to visit.
The Verdict: Very well put together, this site is perfect for the Peanuts **fan. (KG)**

The Official Site For Garfield And Friends

www.garfield.com

Now **Garfield**, the other titan of US newspaper strips, I can understand. Whereas **Peanuts** is the Woody Allen of strip cartoons, all neurotic and highbrow, **Garfield** is the Saturday Night Live of the comics supplement: superficial, hedonistic, but very very funny. Unfortunately, the website is not as good as its rival's. The site takes a painfully long time to load, largely due to the huge amount of graphics used. This is one for off-peak surfing with a cable connection, I fear.

Also disappointing is the lack of information. Anyone wanting to find information on **Garfield** or creator Jim Davis is advised to look elsewhere, as this site is devoted to giving or selling stuff to you. E-postcards can be downloaded, the strip can be emailed to you everyday, and it's possible to buy all kinds of merchandise, but there is no sign of a biography or a history or any of the nifty features that make the **Peanuts** site interesting. Still, at least the Big Orange Cat himself is as funny as ever.
The Verdict: Plenty of resources but no hard information, making this site perfect for the fan, but disappointing for the enthusiast. And that's only if their connection's good enough. (KG)

Paul J. Holden: The Portal

http://homepage.ntlworld.com/pauljholden/

Paul Holden is one of the fresh new artists on the UK scene, with a solid small press catalogue and a number of strips in comics such as **Warhammer Monthly** and **2000AD**. His site has gone through a number of incarnations and upgrades to get to this point, and although this is the neatest and most professional-looking version so far, there is a disappointing lack of material on offer. Much of it appears to be under construction, and the gallery is tiny, which is a shame as Holden's art is rather nice to look at.

That said, Holden's weblog, the highlight of previous incarnations of the site, is as entertaining as ever. As a look into the mind and routine of a comic artist it is interesting enough, but Holden's witty writing particularly makes it a feature well worth a look.
The Verdict: The lack of actual stuff is a pain, but is largely offset by the artist's charming and funny commentaries on life. (KG)

DRAWING BOARD SPECIAL: MIKE DEODATO JR

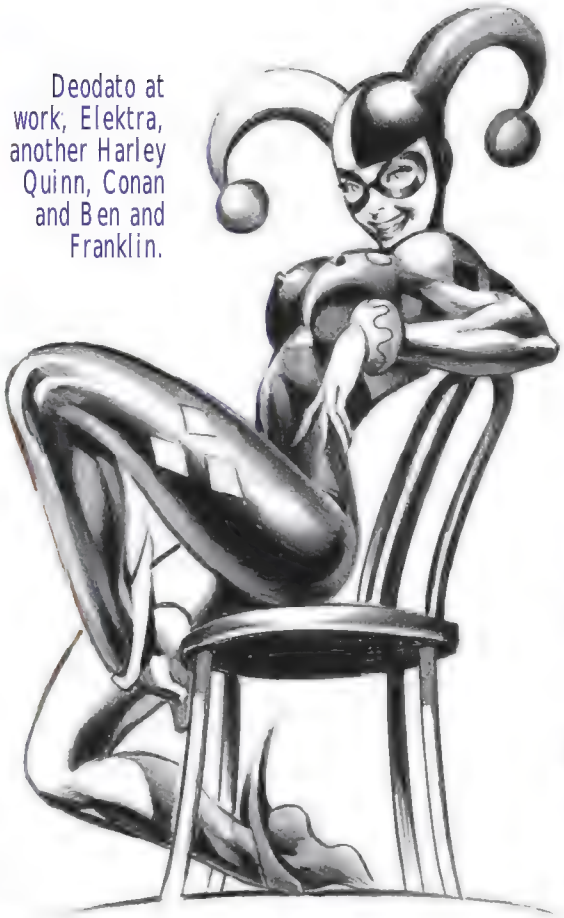
LAST summer, Mike Deodato Jr sent **Borderline** (and a number of other comics magazines) a selection of sketches he'd produced. As the magazine had done a big feature on Dèo in #3, as editor I felt we didn't want the readers thinking **Borderline** was a publicity vehicle for the Brazilian comics industry!

But now, nearly a year later and with very few of these images seen widely, we thought you might like to see them.

Avengers/JLA

... And a host of ladies! Banzai Girl, Vampirella, Mary Marvel, Harley Quinn, Wonder Woman and the Black Widow.

Deodato at work, Elektra, another Harley Quinn, Conan and Ben and Franklin.



EASTERN PROMISE

Where's it at?

FOR a fan of comics, and specifically a novice fan of Japanese comics, it was difficult to find any information years ago. There were, and still are, few magazines you could read that would explain Japanese comics, their numerous series and creators. With Japanese animations – *anime* - this has not been the case, with magazines such as **Animerica** and **Anime-UK** existing before the Internet boom. Yes, they covered manga, but not to any real extent – the focus was primarily on animation. Often manga was only mentioned if an anime was based on one. The recent introduction of **NewType USA** has increased this focus on anime – it being an English-language version of a popular Japanese magazine about anime.

This is strange, considering the increasing popularity of manga, a popularity that doesn't seem to have been repeated across the rest of the comics industry. Of course, it isn't as though manga is never mentioned; it's talked about all of the time, but not exclusively. Usually, as with this column, it is only in reference to translated comics; those that haven't been translated receive only passing mention. A small move to address this balance was made by **Animerica Extra**, a manga-oriented companion to **Animerica**, but this was primarily a place to publish newly translated series, such as **Steam Detectives** and **Video Girl Ai**. Series yet to be published in English were highlighted on, at most, a single page – sometimes multiple series were highlighted on a spread of several pages, due to their similar genres or subjects, but that was it.

The drought of informative magazines on untranslated manga has left most English-speaking fans with two options: learning Japanese, or using the Internet. Learning Japanese would likely save both time and expense in the long run – and you could then obtain the comics from the source. Anyone who craves Japanese comics could be considered lazy for not attempting to learn Japanese. But we westerners, we are a lazy bunch. How many people learn Japanese solely to be able to play video games earlier? Not that many. Someone always will, it's the way of the world.

But you get my point - learning Japanese, while sensible, could also be considered a tad extreme for what amounts to a hobby. That leaves the Internet, then.

A simple bit of surfing can get you a long way. The Internet sometimes seems to have been devised solely so that groups of people can get fanatical over something, and display their fanaticism to the world. The thing is, and this is a real heartbreaker, manga is sorely under-represented when compared to its cousin anime.

Search for **Dragon Ball**, Akira Toriyama's martial arts masterpiece, and you're far more likely to find pages on the TV series and movies than on the comic. **Dragon Ball** is just one example, but you'll find that this is often true for most titles that happen to have been turned into cartoons. Search for **Trigun** by Yasuhiro Naito, a comic yet to be translated, and you're also far more likely to find fan sites devoted to the cartoon, than to locate one devoted to the comics which spawned it.

It does make you wonder whether anyone knows that these cartoons are based on comics.

All has not exactly been lost, however, thanks to sites like the wonderful Kodanclub (*http://www.kodanclub.com*) – a site put together by Kodansha, one of the large Japanese publishers, whose stable includes many comics being translated by Studio Proteus for Dark Horse Comics. This site does its best to give a brief summary of various Japanese comics and includes artwork and the occasional translated preview, just to whet your appetite more. With the increasing popularity of Japanese comics in the West, it would be good if more sites like this popped up, sites put together by Japanese publishers for an English audience.

The web has prompted some Japanese artists to attempt to increase their profile. Santa Inoue, creator of the comics **Tokyo Tribe 2** and **Tokyo Graffiti**, has published a free preview of Tokyo Tribe 2 on his site Santastic Entertainment (*http://www.santa.co.jp*) and has even gone to the pains of publishing it translated into English - albeit very badly. Inoue is an often-mentioned artist, with a lot of people wanting to see his work translated; he almost managed to have some work published in English, with Viz attempting to obtain a story by him for their **Secret Comics Japan** project. Unfortunately, unusual circumstances prevented this from happening, and he remains on the Japanese-only list. Had I not just mentioned him to you, would you have known who he was? He has been producing these comics for a number of years, has gained some degree of fame in Asia, but has yet to move across the Pacific – even thought his style of comics would perfectly suit the teenage boy market, with its violent, hip-hop, gang-influenced look.

All of this information is available, right at your fingertips. Finding it, however, is a trick. If you've ever seen a picture on a site somewhere, and wondered who did it, you *can* find out who. It might take some time, but it's possible…

BORDERLINE VOL #1 CDS

Would you like a complete set of **Borderline**?
The first 20 regular issues, the Manhattan Projects Special, and a special bonus Borderline feature?
Over the last 20 months we've covered some major events, interviewed some pretty big people and produced one of the most popular and dependable comics magazines in the world.
How much is it going to cost?
If you live in the UK it's £17.50 inclusive. The USA is $37.50 inclusive and Europe is €40.00
Other countries please enquire - all prices inclusive of p&p.
All cheques and IMOs should be made payable to ***Borderline Media Ltd*** and please allow at least 28 days for delivery.
All enquiries to the editorial address on page 2.
Contact *squonk_uk@yahoo.com* for payment details!

MAN ON A MISSION

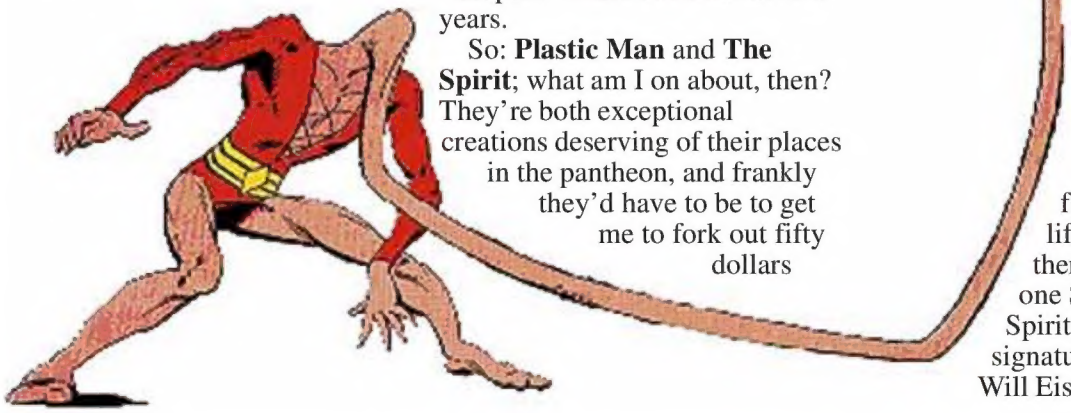
Martin Shipp thought he was going to be writing an editorial this month, but fate and Plastic Man intervened...

I'VE been spending too much time and far too much money on the DC Archive collections of **The Spirit** and of **Plastic Man**. Luckily, the **Plastic Man** collections are on an annual publishing schedule and as such come as a pleasant seasonal offering. **The Spirit** books, while as welcome - and sometimes more so - than the **PM**, are issued every six months. This can, although I hate to admit it, make them seem like a very expensive regular comics purchase. Until they actually arrive, that is. These weighty hardbacks not only do the material the justice it deserves but also bring with them a whiff of nostalgia, their content reminding me of the Kitchen Sink black-and-white reprints through which I, like many of my generation, first became aware of Eisner's astonishing work .

The **Plastic Man** books are also strongly reminiscent of times past, but for a slightly different reason. **The Spirit** is rightly considered a touchstone, a marker of what comics can and should be; **Plastic Man** has always been one of my favourite comics characters regardless of where he appeared or who was responsible for the stories (all of whom pale beside Cole despite being among the best creators in the medium). Readily available, reasonably priced volumes of **Plastic Man**'s early appearances are very good things indeed.

Exactly why there *is* a series of **Plastic Man** Archives escapes me. As much as I love him, it isn't as if "Plas" is the most popular of characters; I doubt the sales on the books make them a money-spinner to any great extent. The series quite probably owes its existence to Grant Morrison and Art Spiegelman, both of whom "adopted" **Plastic Man** in recent years.

So: **Plastic Man** and **The Spirit**; what am I on about, then? They're both exceptional creations deserving of their places in the pantheon, and frankly they'd have to be to get me to fork out fifty dollars apiece on them. Between them, they also show two ways in which the relationship between character and creator has taken place.



The difference between Will Eisner and Jack Cole is that Eisner kept tight hold on and ownership of his creation. Nobody touches **The Spirit** without Will's say-so. Cole, however, worked on **PM** for a publisher who kept control of the character. Cole probably kept a tighter creative grip over **PM** than Eisner did over **The Spirit** simply by virtue of actually having a hand in most if not all of the material that bore his name. Eisner farmed out near enough every creative task to his studio for a period - not a criticism, by the way - but Eisner owned **The Spirit** in a way that Cole never did **Plastic Man**.

As a result, for most of the life of the character there has been only one Spirit, and that Spirit has borne the signature of his creator Will Eisner. There have, however, been many versions of **Plastic Man**, and they have borne many signatures. Gil Kane's, or Marty Pasko's, or Joe Staton's or Hilary Barta's or Grant Morrison's or Ty Templeton's or Joe Kelly's, to name a few. All of whom are fine creators, but none of whom are Jack Cole. Each brings a distinctive creative feel to the character, from Pasko's all-out comedic take to Barta's literal acid casualty to Kelly's current "more powerful than you ever thought" Plas, but each different interpretation is an offshoot from Cole's original. We as readers may gain a greater body of **Plastic Man** stories, but these will never be Jack Cole **Plastic Man** stories and as a result will never be - with the greatest respect to all those involved and to the stories themselves - a product of anything other than commercial consideration. Only Will Eisner can create a Spirit story (as was proved by the "New Adventures" of a few years back), but anybody can create a **Plastic Man** story - provided there is an editorial demand for it.

Which is why **Plastic Man**, despite being as iconic a character as **The Spirit**, has never entirely been held in the same esteem. There is a body of work that we name "The Spirit" and with that naming we summon the indivisible Eisner. Mention **Plastic Man** to any but the historically-inclined comics reader and the response is likely to be "That Goofy Stretchy Guy In The JLA". It's an unavoidable situation; if the character had died with Jack Cole in 1958, there would be no "modern" **Plastic Man**. We can accept a non-Cole **PM** with ease, while the idea of anybody else touching **The Spirit** makes us recoil.

Imagine this, though. Jack Cole lived, and continued to produce **Plastic Man** stories while growing and evolving as a creator in the manner we rightly revere Will Eisner for. Would we accept anybody else's take on the character as anything other than shoddy copying? Conversely, if Will Eisner had sold **The Spirit** to DC Comics when he was drafted into the US Army in 1942, would we be seeing a guy in a mask and a slouch hat backing up the JLA? And frankly, would we care about him? Somehow I think not.

And that, oh best beloved, is why creators, not publishers, should own their creations.

Martin Shipp reviews ***DC Comics' Plastic Man Archives Volume 4*** *in this issue's* The Verdict.

WORLD OF HEROS

Daphne overshot the mark and left a stain on the rug... Chris "SC" Spicer.

DARK HORSE: SMALL ROCKETS, DICE

Dark Horse has announced that a new comics imprint, called *Small Rocket Comics*, will launch this summer.

The imprint will be made up of six ongoing monthly titles, with two launching in July and the rest following in August and September. According to a Dark Horse statement, these titles will feature "high-energy adventure stories that focus on strong characters who exist in extreme situations, but who at their core are just like the people reading their stories."

Reaction from fans has been slow. "Dark Horse?," asked one puzzled newsgroup visitor. "Who are they? I know Marvel, DC, and Image, but Dark Horse? Never heard of them."

Another comics fan told us. "That's right, they make Star Wars comics. And the Alien and Buffy comics too. So, what films are these titles going to be based on? They're going to be original? No, come on, really, what are they going to be based on?"

After painstaking research we finally found someone who was even vaguely interested in Dark Horse comics. This anonymous reader (he doesn't want anyone to know he reads Dark Horse comics) told us: "I'm not sure this is a good idea. Firstly, I doubt the market can support another imprint right now; I reckon it'll be cancelled within a year. Anyone remember *Comic's Greatest World*? Didn't think so. And secondly I have my doubts over the content. Characters who at their core are just like the people reading them? Why would I want to read about people like me? I mean, I AM me, and it's really not that entertaining."

Above: A small rocket, yesterday. Launch not shown.

Our anonymous correspondent continued: "I mean, go to any comics convention and look at the people you find there. Would you rely on any of them to save the world? These are people who dress up like Klingons and think it's funny, for God's sake, some of think they even look cool! Who would you want to rescue you from a horde of salivating aliens - *Flash Gordon*, or some nerd who owns the entire first season of *Babylon 5*? Bring on Flash Gordon, and leave Nigel huddling in the corner whimpering and quietly urinating himself."

The title's subjects range from robotic bounty hunters to bizarre creatures and from intergalactic police forces to lone gunmen with mysterious pasts. Or, as our anonymous reader put it; "Have you noticed how most of these titles feature a thoroughly normal, boring person who somehow enters a world of cliches and nonsense? Just like when I walk into a comics shop. Wow, I guess these characters are life-like after all."

EISNER JUDGES ANNOUNCED, CRITICISED

The judging panel for this year's Eisner awards has just been announced, and the selection of judges has been slammed by a noted online news column.

World Of Heros, a column in the popular downloadable magazine **Borderline**, has criticised the panel, which includes Time Magazine comics columnist Andrew D. Arnold, Steve Leaf, product manager for Diamond Comic Distributors, and celebrated creator Charles Vess. Foremost amongst the criticisms levelled by the influential news column has been the lack of vision shown in choosing the judges, particularly in the failure of the awards' organisers to include Chris Spicer, writer of influential news column *World Of Heros*.

In a brilliant article, *World Of Heros* writer Chris Spicer wrote: "The absence of noted writer, critic and columnist Chris Spicer casts a shadow over what would normally be an important award, rendering it utterly and irrevocably pointless. Spicer's presence on the panel would have leant it an importance and confidence that it is otherwise sorely lacking. Without him, this award is little more than nonsense."

Influential news column *World Of Heros* has been quick to leap to Spicer's support, claiming that the awards' organisers have made a "fatal error" in not choosing someone so "intelligent, witty and downright gorgeous" to be a member of the judging panel. "Spicer would have shone like a star on this judging panel," read a recent issue of *World Of Heros*; "Without him, it is a complete waste of time."

We at *World Of Heros* would like to state our support for the writers of *World Of Heros*, who have always proven themselves to be accurate, highly-skilled writers with a flair for news reporting and a spark of wit that illuminates the page like the brightest sun. The *World Of Heros* team is shocked that not only does the judging panel not include noted writer Chris Spicer, but that the writers of the influential news column *World Of Heros* have also been overlooked. While the awards will no doubt be popular amongst a certain, unintelligent type of comics fan, we are certain that for the intelligent and beautiful readers of *World Of Heros*, this article will have ruined the Eisners forever. FOREVER.

Will Eisner and Frank Miller, moments after someone has asked which of the two prefers snorting cocaine off the naked bodies of pre-teen Taiwanese prostitutes.

HOLD THE BACK PAGE

Send any electronic correspondence to editorial@ borderlinemagazine.co.uk or snail mails to HTBP, 45 Fullingdale Road, Northampton, England NN3 2PZ

Rik Wenks
Rotterdam, The Netherlands

YOUR article about Bill Willingham's exceptional, but short-lived, **Coventry** series was just what the doctor ordered. **Coventry** was a fine comic that simply didn't reach the audience it should have done. Issues of it were as hard to find as a decent five cent cigar.

I must point out though that Willingham is continuing **Coventry** in a series of short novels entitled 'Beowulf'. These are available from good comic shops or direct from Willingham at his website, *www.clockworkstorybook.com*.

Keep up the fine work.

You are absolutely right, Rik, I just wasn't aware of this information when I wrote the article. -- *Phil Hall*

Lloyd Vibbowski
Tiger Bay, Cardiff, Wales

I appreciate all the hard work you put into your magazine and realise it isn't always possible to get photos of the people you interview, but I met Ann Nocenti once, at a signing in either cardiff or Birmingham during the 1980s and to be honest with you, I would given half the chance - she was a lovely woman! Any chance of hooking out an old picture of Ms Nocenti from the Eighties and showing the kids what they missed?

I always like to run photos of creators in interviews because I think you like to see who looks like what. But, as for Annie, we can go one better than the 1980s, Lloyd, Annie sent us a picture of herself, taken just last year, in her native New York. However it arrived after the last issue was finished, so here it is to the right.

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Rad Kerrigan
Norwich, England

Would you consider running a letters page again? I only ask because I really enjoyed seeing Martin Shipp's defence of his **100 Bullets** review in #16.

It'd be interesting to see more of that kind of thing, and may even sharpen up a few of the reviewers if they have to answer to criticism. (not that I'm implying any of them are bad of course).

Good point and guess what? ☺ Here it is, back by popular demand. Now all you people who want a letters column had better start writing letters that warrant inclusion! I got criticised once for saying we didn't run a letters column because we get too many positive letters, but that was the sad truth and frankly I get embarrassed reading praiseworthy letters. So, who knows what you, the reader, thinks normally when being subjected to self-aggrandising, trumpet-blowing big-heads from other magazines. Interesting letters pages should be for debate and for questions the columnists and reviewers didn't ask. It should also be for announcements and special things, like these words and that picture of the lovely Annie Nocenti...